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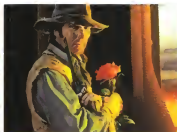
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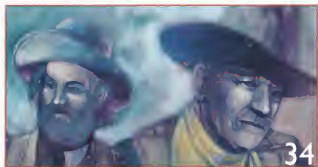
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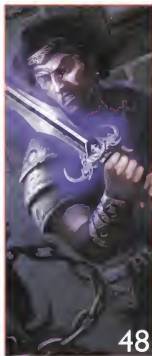
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Dispossession

Lately I've been packing my belongings, many of them story objects: books, comics, games, videos, CDs, and DVDs. Okay, so it's mostly books—thousands of pounds of books, according to the movers and the bow-backed shelves that stare at me as I give away their former contents as quickly as my friends will take them. No matter how many they carry off, I can tell already that I'm going to need more shelves—and that extra room—in the new apartment.

It used to be impossible for me to give away books. I still keep most that I think I'll read again, along with autographed copies and volumes designed so beautifully that they're as much decor as literature. Apart from those precious few, fortunately, it's not as hard as it used to be to part with some thing I know a friend will enjoy. So while the bibliophile in me twitches each time I let a good book leave my library, there's some consolation that my friend is in for a treat. And I still remember the story.

Working on *Amazing Stories* has been good practice for this sort of self-denial. Many wonderful review copies cross our desks that we on the staff want for ourselves, but of course that would be self-defeating. Thus, we've learned to be content with the occasional extra copy and going to the movie screenings—experiences taken away only in memory, at least until the DVD releases. Sometimes, especially with the comics and DVDs, we'll read or watch them before sending them to the reviewer. The objects are gone, but the experience remains.

This is my last issue of *Amazing Stories* as editor-in-chief, and while I'm heading toward an exciting job in an exotic (well, exotic to me) location, it's hard to leave my extraordinary colleagues and the talented contributors to and other friends of the magazine. When I begin to worry about how much I will miss these people, the Seattle area, and all the interaction with fellow lovers of amazing stories—from the attendees of Norwescon, the Nebula awards, Comic-Con International, and Foolsap; to the staff of the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame; to the *Amazing* writers and readers who chat online or send us letters of comment—I remind myself that I'm taking the stories of our time together with me. The experiences come with me.

As you read these words, a new editor-in-chief is already helming this magazine, and you should already be getting to know him via the messageboards at paizo.com/amazing—where you can also do a little holiday shopping. While you're there searching for your next story object, consider giving your friends something you've bought for yourself and loved: a favorite book, comic, or DVD. If you aren't the sort to read a book over and over, or if you think it'll be years before you do—give it away. Treasure the experience, not the object. Your reward will be the pleasure of discussing the story with your friend, who can either keep the object or pass it along. Of course, if you worry—as I sometimes do—that the author isn't getting paid for the second experience of the story, you can always buy a second one to keep at home.

But I'm warning you: you're going to need more shelves.



Illustration by Randy Martinez



Dave Gross
Editor-in-Chief

AMAZING



About the Cover

Bob Parr rushes into action as Mr. Incredible, his superheric alterego, in Pixar's latest CG blockbuster, *The Incredibles*.

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What's on Your Wish List?

This issue of *Amazing Stories* includes a gift guide teeming with suggestions for your holiday wish list. But what about your *Amazing Stories* wish list: What do you wish we'd include in an upcoming issue? What are your suggestions for feature articles? Who do you wish we'd interview for "Q&A"? What month from history do you wish "Time Machine" would visit next? And who are the fiction writers you're dying to read in *Amazing Stories*?

We'd love to know your *Amazing Stories* wishes, so send them to amazing@paizo.com or to:

Dispatches
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Be sure to make your wishes known on our messageboards too. You'll find them at paizo.com/amazing.

Our distribution has expanded significantly since our elusive first two issues, so tell your friends who couldn't find the first few issues to check again at their local bookstores and newsstands ... and then to email us about what they think or, better yet, to check out our spiffy messageboards at paizo.com/amazing.

Mummy Dearest

I note the writers—Sterling, Ellison, and so on—you've managed to get in *Amazing Stories*, and I praise you for that. Hope you can make a go. As A.J. Budrys wrote in *Galaxy* almost forty years ago (reviewing Joe Ross's *Best of Amazing*), "The old girl always seems about to die, and then someone comes with a fresh supply of tana leaves."

Barry N. Malzberg
Amazing Stories editor, 1968
Teaneck, NJ

It's a Miracle

After I read the short stories in *Amazing Stories* 604, I turned to the Internet and looked up each of the authors. I found some good information on each of them, but I think I hit the jackpot when I did

a search on the "Miracle Brigade," from the Mike Resnick story ["Cobbling Together a Solution," *Amazing Stories* 604]. I found a 1997 interview where Mr. Resnick said that he was working on writing a series of short stories to follow his Kirinyaga stories ... the Miracle Brigade.

This short interview made me think of a couple things. First, has Mike Resnick written other Miracle Brigade stories, and will *Amazing Stories* pick up any of them? And second, in hindsight I realized that I enjoyed reading the interview. Are we going to see interviews with contributing authors?

Several of our contributors are multiaward-winning authors. I'd like to see what they have to say about writing, or who their favorite authors are, or even their other interests and hobbies.

Casey Jacobson
Seoul, South Korea

Mike Resnick replies:

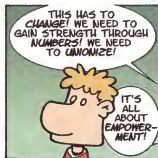
Hi, Casey Whose Address I Do Not Envy—The nice people at *Amazing Stories* passed your letter on to me. It is true that I had planned to write the Miracle Brigade stories right after I finished the Kirinyaga story cycle ... but occasionally life intervenes. There were some family illnesses (not mine;

an older generation) and a number of novel deadlines, and then some other short fiction took my interest, and all of a sudden it was the spring of 2004 and I hadn't written a word of the Miracle Brigade stories—but I still thought there was more than enough material for a book or two of them. Everywhere I traveled in the Third World, and especially in Africa, where we've made half a dozen trips, I saw endless examples of the well-meaning idiocy that the Brigade has to solve with simple, commonsense approaches.

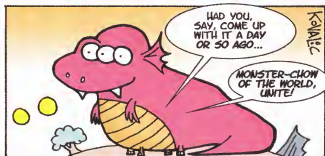
Then, in April of 2004, I was the guest of honor at Norwescon, a large science-fiction convention held annually in Seattle. While I was there I met Dave Gross, who was putting together the first few issues of *Amazing*. He bought me breakfast—it was two in the afternoon, but that's my morning—and asked me to contribute something to the magazine ... and I suddenly remembered the *Miracle Brigade*. He was properly enthusiastic—and flattery will get you everywhere with me—so I went home the next week, sat right down, and wrote the first one. He bought it, asked for another, and we were in business.

(Sometimes Art—or even Attempted Art—takes a while to get itself done. I had the idea for "The 43 Antarean Dynasties," one of my Hugo winners, in my notebook

REDSHIRTS



by John Kovalic



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for eight years before I sat down and wrote it in a single sitting; and Hollywood has been making—or trying to make—a movie from my novel *Santiago* for the better part of thirteen years now.)

Anyway, yes, I'll keep writing the *Miracle Brigade* stories as long as *Amazing* keeps asking for them. [Mike's second *Miracle Brigade* story will run next issue. —Ed.] And since my creditors have expensive tastes, if *Amazing* stops asking for them I'll do my best to convince someone else to ask. An added advantage, from my viewpoint, is that they're a lot of fun to write.

As for interviews, I think it's a good idea—certainly I always like to see what my peers have to say about things—but I'm just the (occasionally) hired help. That decision is up to the guys who pay the bills around here. But for what it's worth, I second your motion.

—Mike Resnick

Fear Is the Mind Killer

I discovered through a mention in *Locus* that Paizo was planning to relaunch *Amazing Stories*, so I hurriedly went to your website to read more. You had a subscription page up, with not much information, but there was enough there that I thought I would give the magazine a try. Considering that there might again be a magazine-format periodical that would feature original science-fiction stories and book reviews was enough to make my heart race.

That situation occurred months ago, and today I received my first issue of the new *Amazing*. I was a little put off at first by the

Spider-Man 2 cover, as it made the magazine look more like a relaunch of *Starlog* or something, but I nonetheless journeyed inside. I think this type of imagery might be a problem for you in the future, as it undersells what is actually within the magazine. I also realize that you might fall back into poor sales with painted science-fiction covers, so this may be a good way to get readers to give the magazine a try: by putting an image of a favorite or upcoming movie or TV show on the cover. Time will tell, I guess.

Once I opened the magazine, however, my fears were dashed immediately. There were articles and reviews to be found about everything: books, magazines, comics, movies—you name it. I was immediately excited and pleased. This was exactly what I was hoping for from this magazine. The addition of the nice comics section made it even better, with such features as the comic-book tie-in to the *Batman Begins* movie (the mention of possible storylines from the comics) was a terrific idea. Best of all, you had original fiction in the back (Harlan Ellison!) and some wonderful small interviews with writers like Michael Moorcock.

Seriously, I cannot wait for the next issue. Keep up the good work, and outside of the covers, don't change a thing! I'll stay a subscriber for as long as you'll have me. Take care.

Jay Willson
Mesa, AZ

Working Out

Such a good magazine! So much content! The first and second



We will miss you, Dave Gross.

(Editor-in-Chief,
Amazing Stories 603–606)

Best wishes for your journey ahead
from the entire staff at Paizo Publishing.

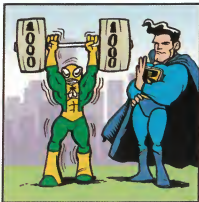
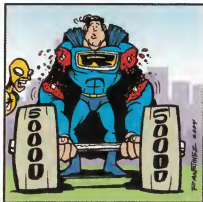
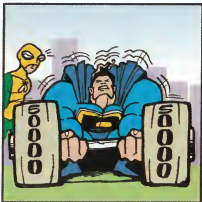


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Illustration by Randy Martinez

issues arrived only a day apart.
Loved the article about Ray
Bradbury. Haven't finished all the
stories yet in the first volume.
I liked them all, but my favorite
so far is "Alias the Stranger" [by
Larry Tritten, *Amazing Stories*
604]. All of the stories have a
muscular arrogance I associate
with the golden-age writers like
Heinlein, especially the Resnick
story—which is a good thing!

Oh, and did I say the magazines
are beautiful? Good job all around.

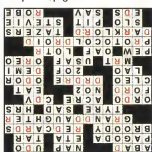
Karen Tynes
Memphis, TN

AS

A Red-letter Day

Answer Key

See puzzle, page 12



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A RED-LETTER DAY

by Mike Selinker

ACROSS

- 1 "I've got ____ feeling about this" (big line in *Star Wars* films)
- 5 Forty winks
- 8 Actor Kier of *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein*
- 11 Japanese temple
- 14 Greek H
- 15 Paving need
- 16 Like many Anne Rice vampires
- 17 Soccer penalties
- 20 Terry Pratchett's Susan the schoolteacher, in *re Death*
- 22 UK rubber item
- 23 Strong ____ (Homestar-Runner character)
- 24 48 ____
- 25 "Do ____ not, there is no try" (Yoda)
- 28 Land unit
- 30 405, in Rome
- 32 He played Deckard in *Blade Runner*
- 33 Pencil used for tests
- 34 Consume
- 36 Discredited TV psychic Miss ____
- 37 Rapper born Andre Young
- 40 Stench
- 42 *Seven Faces of Dr. ____* (Tony Randall film)
- 43 ____ clubs (opening card in hearts)
- 44 Moore of the 3-D stinker *Parasite*
- 45 He pitied the fool
- 47 American flyboys, for short
- 48 Bifurcated cookie
- 49 Church bench
- 51 LummoX
- 53 J.R.R.'s epic
- 55 C-3PO's function
- 59 9-Down, for one
- 60 Electrical jolters
- 63 ____-mo
- 64 Poe's "The ____ and the Pendulum"
- 65 Mr. Wonder
- 66 Asner and O'Neill
- 67 ____-A-Lot store chain
- 68 Gandalf adornment

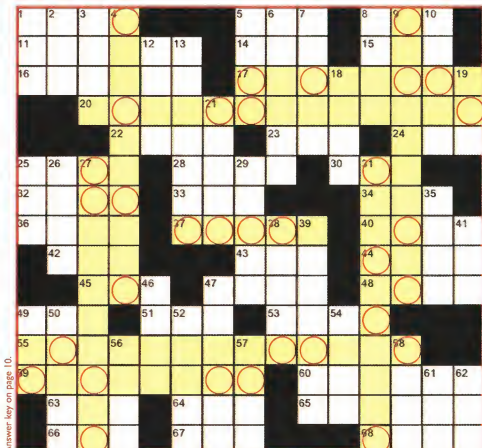
DOWN

- 1 "Calling all cars" announcement
- 2 Cantina
- 3 Intensely excited
- 4 Method of selling encyclopedias

- 5 Geek
- 6 Resting, to a Space Marine
- 7 *Taming of the Shrew* setting
- 8 2002 Olympic site
- 9 Tie-fighter pilot of note
- 10 The ____ (Heath Ledger film)
- 12 *Saving Private Ryan* scene
- 13 Author of *Atlas Shrugged*
- 18 Event for electronic entertainment creators, briefly
- 19 Grads-to-be
- 21 *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* concern
- 25 U ____ (IL school)
- 26 Word with stop and drop
- 27 Land of fantasies
- 29 What the red-lettered yellow entries might be said to be
- 31 Febreeze is one
- 35 Big book
- 38 Willy Wonka creator Dahl
- 39 Attempts
- 41 "Her name is" this, per Duran Duran
- 46 Hammer or shovel
- 47 Movie with Cindy Williams as a saucer-worshipping prophet
- 49 Abbr. for a rain-delayed game
- 50 Eradicate
- 52 Rent-____ (security options)
- 54 Perfectly
- 56 VBF events
- 57 Low-bandwidth digital TV standard
- 58 New Wave band animated in *Heavy Metal*
- 61 Kidman broke one making *Moulin Rouge*
- 62 Douglas Adams's *Last Chance to ____*

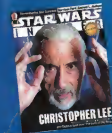
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Answer key on page 10.

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Companion Diary



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P L E A S E P R I N T



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THE MUSIC OF THE NIGHT

Sixteen years ago Andrew Lloyd Webber rocked London and then Broadway with what has become its second-longest-running musical. Now Webber adapts his stage play into a screenplay: Warner Brothers' *The Phantom of the Opera* opens in December.

The classic story is based on Gaston Leroux's 1911 novel about a disfigured and mysterious man. Long before Webber created his own version of Phantom, Hollywood translated Leroux's book to screen several times, including the 1925 silent movie that made Lon Chaney a star.

The story takes place at the Paris Opera House in the 1880s, a time when belief in the supernatural and the spirit world captivated France. Gerard Butler (*Reign of Fire*, *Dracula 2000*) plays the Phantom, who lives in the catacombs beneath the opera house like a ghost haunting its performers. He falls in love with an up-and-coming soprano, Christine (Emmy Rossum, recently seen in *The Day After Tomorrow*), and takes her under his wing, determined to make her a star.

The Phantom takes drastic steps to pave the way for Christine, putting everyone in the opera house in danger. But while Christine is accepting the Phantom as her mentor, she's also falling in love with a member of the company, Raoul (Patrick Wilson, of HBO's *Angels in America*). When the Phantom finds out, he presents his protégé with a terrible choice.

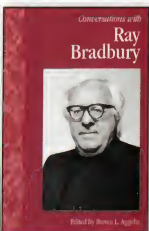




A Most Unhappy Tale

In the gothic, funny, runaway-hit *Series of Unfortunate Events* books by Lemony Snicket, the Baudelaire orphans—Violet, Klaus, and Sunny—are sent to live with relatives after their parents die in a terrible fire. The trouble is, the Baudelaire children have inherited a vast fortune, and their relatives want it.

Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, opening December 17 from Paramount and DreamWorks, is based on three books in the popular children's series: *A Bad Beginning*, *The Reptile Room*, and *The Wide Window*. Jim Carrey stars as Count Olaf, the first relative to take in the orphans. Count Olaf is an evil genius and a master of disguise, and he's determined to steal the children's inheritance. But he must outwit their other relatives, including Uncle Monty (Billy Connolly, recently in *The Lost Samurai*) and Aunt Josephine (Meryl Streep). Jude Law stars as the mysterious Lemony Snicket himself.



My Dinner with Asimov ... and Bradbury

University Press of Mississippi has compiled interviews with two genre giants: Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury. *Conversations with Ray Bradbury*, edited by Steven L. Aggelis, was published in July, and *Conversations with Isaac Asimov* is slated for publication next year.

Each book is a collection of interviews that span the life of the author. The idea is to showcase

the development of each writer's ideas and how those ideas translate into the written word over the course of a lifetime.

For example, Bradbury talks about reading *Amazing Stories* magazine when it was first published in the 1920s, as well as what was happening in the world at the beginning of his career. He explains why he considers *Fahrenheit 451* his only science-fiction novel and sees his other novels as works of fantasy and horror. "There are two ways for a writer to be dishonest in this world," Bradbury says. "One is to write for the dollar, for the fast buck. The second way is to slant one's stories toward an intellectual bias."

Look for *Conversations with Isaac Asimov* to hit the stands in summer 2005.



I Won't Grow Up

Miramax's *Finding Neverland* opens on November 12, starring Johnny Depp as Peter Pan novelist and dramatist J.M. Barrie. Set in 1904 London and based on Allen Knee's stage play *The Man Who Was Peter Pan*, the story follows Barrie from the moment he's inspired until the night his famous play premieres at the Duke of York's Theater.

More than a biopic, *Finding Neverland* promises fantasy sequences featuring Peter Pan and Wendy, as Barrie imagines the world while he's inventing it.



Photos courtesy of Galaxy Press

CELEBRATING THE WRITE STUFF

No writer ever forgets his or her initial sale, and while most celebrate the achievement with a champagne toast or dinner at an expensive restaurant, a lucky few rejoice at a once-a-year event that's truly out of this world. The party for L. Ron Hubbard's *Writers of the Future* contest winners is so lavish that *World Fantasy*—and Philip K. Dick Award-winning novelist Tim Powers, who serves as a judge for the competition, reminds the fledgling wordsmiths that they shouldn't become used to the hoopla.

"I have to tell them. This is your first sale. Your second sale will not be like this," he laughs. "They won't fly you to Los Angeles. You won't meet John Travolta. You won't hang out with writers like Frederik Pohl and Anne McCaffrey. The second sale is likely to be a check for \$200 that simply comes in the mail."

Sill, there's little question that winning the competition is reason to celebrate. For the past two decades, *Writers of the Future* has afforded unpublished authors—and since 1988, through the accompanying *Illustrators of the Future* contest, up-and-coming artists—an opportunity to see their efforts in print and to participate in an all-expenses-paid, week-long seminar conducted in Los Angeles. The class culminates with a lavish, black-tie soiree, held this year at the Beverly Hills Hotel, where the neophyte (and exhausted) authors are feted and the *Writers of the Future* anthology is unveiled.

"It's a learning experience for the people who want to write in the field," adds McCaffrey, who has served as a judge for the past nineteen years. "They learn that not only will their stories be published, but they should go on and keep writing. It's really a reaffirmation of speculative fiction."

The team of judges—which includes legendary authors like Orson Scott Card, Larry Niven, and Jack Williamson, plus such renowned illustrators as Bob Eggleton, Frank Frazetta, and Frank Kelly Freas—review more than ten thousand submissions each year. In selecting the winners, the panel seeks works that are entertaining, expressive, and—most important of all—engaging.

"I get a lot of young kids submitting monsters or heroic figures or beautiful women in science-fiction backgrounds, but they're just portraits," explains Ron Lindahn, the coordinating judge for the *Illustrators of the Future* competition. "When telling a story with an illustration, something is happening and the viewer wants to know what's going on. The image engages you. There is an emotion, and characters are interacting with each other or the environment or some object in some way that makes you really want to know what's happening."

"I don't want the kind of sophistication that would make Mars or the future or a starship seem routine," continues Powers. "I want dislocation and vertigo. I want to be dazzled by the differences from here and now. If I wanted here and now, I would read the newspaper. For this stuff, I want disorientation, what they call 'sense of wonder.'"

This year, William T. Katz's "The Plastic Soul of a Note" was the short story that best captured that "sense of wonder," winning the contest's highest honor, the L. Ron Hubbard Gold Award, with Laura Diehl's imagery achieving the same recognition in the illustration category. Both received impressive Lucite trophies, monetary compensation for their work, and, of course, publication (along with the other winners) in the *Writers of the Future* anthology.

"Don't give up," says the thirty-nine-year-old Katz, who in 2001 left the field of medical technology to pursue writing and other entrepreneurial opportunities full time. "I can't stress that enough. There's a lot of talent out there, but if you work hard and try again and again, you will succeed. You just have to keep your mind open and try to improve the craft of your writing."

Further information on L. Ron Hubbard's *Writers and Illustrators of the Future* competition, which are free and open to all novice authors and artists, is available at www.writersofthefuture.com.

—Jeff Berkwitz



Turf and Surf

Sci Fi takes on fantasy with a four-hour *Earthsea* miniseries scheduled to air in December. *Earthsea* is based on two novels of Ursula K. Le Guin's trilogy: *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Tams of Atuan*.

"They take place in the imaginary world of Earthsea, a world that is mostly water except for a relatively small group of islands that are dotted about fairly close to each other," says screenwriter Gavin Scott, who adapted Le Guin's novels. "It's a bit like [Tolkien's] Middle-earth in the sense that there are wizards and dragons and sorcerers, but it definitely has its own atmosphere. It feels like it's a new planet that you've gone to."

To create the miniseries, Scott blended the two novels into one story. The *Wizard of Earthsea* is Ged's story. He's the son of a blacksmith, but he learns he has the right stuff to become a wizard. Danny Glover plays Ogion, a wizard who helps Ged harness his powers and learn the craft of wizardry. When Ged makes a horrible mistake, he must do whatever is necessary to make things right.

"This is one of the things that makes *The Wizard of Earthsea* a very interesting and unusual work," Scott says. "You could compare it with *The Lord of the Rings*, a fairly straightforward quest: Frodo has to achieve something, but he is not responsible for the existence of the Ring. But in *The Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged . . . is tempted into a contest of sorcery with another student and releases a terrible creature from the netherworld. The reason that the creature is out there and is a threat to him and to Earthsea is his fault. He's got to come to terms with the part of his personality that allowed that thing to come free. Until he understands what really led him to release it, he'll never be able to defeat it."

The second novel is set at a temple complex on a desert island and is about Tenar (played by *Smallville*'s Kristin Kreuk), who is a student of the High Priestess Thar (played by Isabella Rossellini).

"The second story is connected with the search for a talisman inside the Tomb of Atuan and Ged's relationship with the priestess Tenar, who's got to, in effect, break her vows and help Ged find this talisman in order to save Earthsea," Scott says. He is pleased that the stories merge well in the teleplay. "It gives the miniseries a really big epic scope, because Ursula Le Guin has come up with two marvelous ideas . . . and when you put them together and weave them, like strands of DNA, you have something really powerful."

A few years ago Scott adapted *The Mists of Avalon* as a TV miniseries, making him a prime candidate for *Earthsea*. "In adapting *The Mists of Avalon*," he says, "in effect I had to step inside that world, and because Marion Zimmer Bradley had created such an all-embracing world, that was a very easy thing to do. I was kind of living inside Dark Ages England for all the period of time it took to write that and wrestling with all the plot complexities within the context she had created."

"And similarly, with *Earthsea*, Ursula Le Guin had created a world that was completely believable. I was operating within the rules of that world, and that experience was like stepping into an imaginary existence and being absorbed in it for the two years developing the screenplay. It was like living in Earthsea for two years."



GIGANTIC

First-time authors and illustrators weren't the only individuals recognized at the recent Writers of the Future gala. The L. Ron Hubbard Lifetime Achievement Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Arts was also bestowed upon Anne McCaffrey for her impressive body of work and her tireless efforts to educate speculative-fiction newcomers.

"It's sort of an affirmation of the work that I've done," she says, "especially because I've never considered myself a literary writer. I grew up reading Kipling, who was a master storyteller. I'm simply a storyteller."

First presented to illustrious pulp-magazine illustrator Ed Carrion in 1988, previous recipients of the Lifetime Achievement Award include Algis Budrys, Frank Frazetta, Frank Kelly Freas, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, and Jack Williamson.

"It's really an honor, particularly considering the source," notes McCaffrey. "L. Ron Hubbard has been a giant in the field, and for one giant to nod to me makes me feel a bit bigger too."

—Jeff Berkwitz

PASSAGES



Elmer Bernstein

With the deaths earlier this year of longtime film composers Jerry Goldsmith and David Raksin, it has truly been a trying time for movie-music fans. Sadly, that mournful bell continues to toll with the recent passing of **Elmer Bernstein**. In the early 1950s, the legendary composer penned melodies for low-budget adventures like *Robot Monster* and *Cat-Women of the Moon*, and later crafted memorable orchestral

themes for science-fiction tales such as *Sotum 3*, *Heavy Metal*, *Spacehunter: Adventures in the Forbidden Zone*, and *Ghostbusters*. Bernstein was 82.

Coincidentally, another musician associated with *Ghostbusters* has also passed away. Pop singer **Laura Branigan**, 47, who contributed the tune "Hot Night" to film's bestselling soundtrack, died unexpectedly from a brain aneurysm.

Director **Daniel Petrie** has passed on too. While best known for his work in nongenie television, he helmed two well-received science-fiction films: *The Neptune Factor* and *Cocoon: The Return*. He was 83.

Cinematographer **Neal Fredericks**, 35, perished in a plane crash while filming the yet-to-be-released horror movie *Cross Bones*. The cameraman helped create the edgy look of *The Blair Witch Project* and also worked on such fright flicks as *Louhng Dead* and *The Legend of Diablo*.

THX 1138 cinematographer **David Myers** also recently died. Besides contributing to that landmark production, he further added to the George Lucas legend with his behind-the-camera prowess on the popular 1977 made-for-TV documentary *The Making of Star Wars*. Myers was 90.

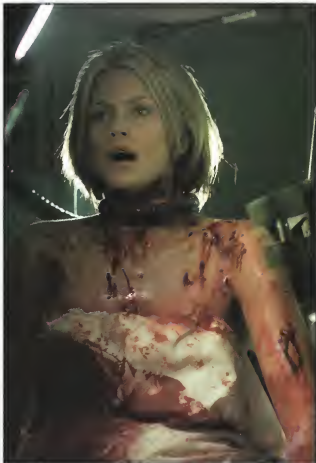
—Jeff Berkwitz



Laura Branigan



Daniel Petrie



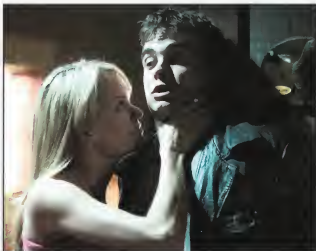
Photos © Sci Fi

Nice Genes



Natascha Henstridge makes a brief return to *Species III*, premiering on Sci Fi on November 27, then scheduled for a DVD release by MGM Home Entertainment on December 7. Sunny Mabrey (*The New Guy*, *A Midsummer Night's Rave*) plays the new alien on the block, souped up, sexier, and stronger. Her hunting ground is a small college town, and her goal is to keep her genetically superior species going strong.

The hero is a professor who sets out to destroy the alien and decode her DNA before she succeeds as an alien Eve and populates the world with her own kind.





Treasure Library

Executive producer Dean Devlin (*Independence Day*) and screenwriter David Titcher (one of the screenwriters on 2004's *Around the World in 80 Days*) team up to bring a blockbuster-quality original movie, *The Librarian*, to TNT in December. Noah Wyle stars as a man who stumbles onto his destiny when he least expects it.

"Our hero is thirty years old and [has been] in college since he was fifteen," says Titcher. "He's one of those guys who's afraid to leave college. Finally, they boot him out, and now he's out in the world—a world he's never been in. He gets this weird invitation to apply for a librarian job. He gets the job at the New York Public Library. On his first day, he's told he's not a librarian—he's the librarian. Once in every generation, there's one man who's the guardian of all these great treasures that are two stories down, underneath the New York Public Library."

On his second day of work, an important artifact is stolen, which launches him on a worldwide adventure to track it down and bring it safely home to the library before the thieves can use it for their own purposes. Along the way, he teams up with a woman who provides the brawn to his brain.

Titcher describes how he came up with the idea for *The Librarian*. "Do you remember the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when the ark is put in that warehouse? I started thinking, what else would be in that warehouse? It's every great object that you could possibly imagine: the Holy Grail, the Fountain of Youth, Excalibur, the Loch Ness Monster, every invention that's ever been hidden, every doomsday machine. I love all those great objects, and I was trying to find a way to put them all together."

Titcher originally wrote *The Librarian* as a feature film. Devlin liked the script but suggested they try TNT instead of the Hollywood studios. "They said it was the best pitch they'd ever heard," Titcher says about TNT. True to their word, TNT supported Titcher in keeping the story he wanted to tell instead of demanding drastic changes, an act for which Hollywood studios are notorious.

"I conceived it as a \$100 million feature film," Titcher says. "And then I figured, I don't know exactly what the budget is, but I can't imagine it's over \$10 million. So I thought, I've got to scale it down."

But a funny thing happened when Titcher showed his scaled-down script to his executive producer. Devlin is savvy about the rapid advancements in special-effects technology and realized that scaling down the script in an effort to stay within the allotted budget wasn't necessary.

He told Titcher to make the action bigger.

"So I wrote my second draft bigger than even my \$100 million feature," Titcher says. "We turned it in to TNT, and it's all great."

If *The Librarian* is successful, it could usher in something that's never happened on television before: a series of TV movies with the scope of expensive feature films.

"If it's successful, then there might be another one and another one," Titcher says.



Gender Bending

Tachyon Publications offers two new books honoring the late Alice Bradley Sheldon, who wrote as James Tiptree Jr. and succeeded in keeping her identity secret for many years. Sheldon used the pseudonym because she "was tired of always being the first woman in some damn profession." In 1991, the Tiptree Award was created to recognize speculative fiction that explores gender roles.

The James Tiptree Award Anthology 1: *Sex, the Future, & Chocolate Chip Cookies* is due in bookstores in November. Featuring stories about the need for sex, love, and acceptance, the collection was selected by editors Karen Joy Fowler (*The Jane Austen Book Club*), Pat Murphy (*Noddy: The Wolf Chronicles*), Debbie Nockin (*Flying Cups and Soucers: Gender Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy*), and Jeffrey D. Smith (the literary trustee of Tiptree's estate). The anthology includes essays by Fowler, Murphy, Suzy McKee Charnas (*The Vampire Tapestry*), Joanna Russ (*The Female Man*), and Ursula K. Le Guin (the *Earthsea* series).

In December look for *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever*, a collection of eighteen Tiptree short stories selected by editor Jeffrey D. Smith. Included are Tiptree's Hugo Award winners, "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" and "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," and her Nebula Award winners, "Love Is the Plan, the Plan Is Death" and "The Screwfly Solution."



PIXELATED HEROES

From *The Iron Giant* to *The Incredibles*: Writer-Director Brad Bird Flies to Pixar

by Resa Nelson



If you could have any superpower, what would it be?

"Flying," says Craig T. Nelson, who stars as the voice of Bob Parr, a.k.a. Mr. Incredible, in *The Incredibles*, due in theaters on November 5 from Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Pictures. "Don't you want to fly? I think that would be great."

Director Brad Bird agrees. "I've had a handful of flying dreams in my life, and I'm always completely bummed out when I wake up and find that it was a dream. A couple of times it's taken me a couple of minutes to figure out it was a dream, because the flying dream was so real."

Mark Andrews, head of story, is the odd man out. "Super strength and especially invulnerability—then you can't get hurt. You'd be really confident if you couldn't get hurt. You wouldn't have any fears. And super strength—you can move things or throw things off people or hold up falling buildings or pull out ocean liners that are sinking."

"I think there are any number of superpowers that would be really great to have, depending on the need," Bird adds. "I think that's the reason people love superheroes. We all want powers that we don't have and [to] overcome obstacles that slow us down. We've all wanted to be invisible and [to] be able to listen in on a conversation or not have anyone pay attention to us and be able to observe from any angle that we choose. We've all wanted to be able to fly or be really strong. [We] want to be able to confront trouble and be invulnerable. Everybody would love some justice. Sometimes the justice is a tiny justice—somebody cuts you off suddenly on the freeway. And sometimes it's big justice: when you feel like somebody is abusing their power and you want to put it straight. I think the superhero is a fantasy that goes to the core of being human."

Writer-director Brad Bird took a cue from Alfred Hitchcock and made a cameo appearance in *The Incredibles*. Bird provides the voice for Edna, a superhero-costume designer.



Meanwhile ...

The Incredibles takes place in a Jetsons-meets-James Bond future where superheroes are commonplace and life is good ... for a while. Flash-forward fifteen years: thanks to vindictive people and the lawsuits they've filed, superheroes are forced to go into hiding. It's too dangerous for superheroes to reveal their superpowers, so they don't. Instead, they take painfully boring day jobs.

"It's almost like a Witness Relocation program for superheroes," Bird explains. "A guy superhero marries a girl superhero, and then they're forced underground, and they have kids who also have superpowers, but the kids are told to never reveal them. So this is a family that's grown up having to keep everything in check. The dad, Bob, who was known as Mr. Incredible, resents having to give up his superhero life. He's not adjusting so well."

Bird takes a dramatic pause, then whispers as if he's part of the witness-protection program for superheroes. "That's all that I can say."

Mr. Incredible used to be one of the world's greatest superheroes. He saved lives every day and was constantly battling evil. But he ends up working as an insurance-claims adjuster, growing pudgy from inactivity. Every night he sneaks out of the house in hopes of finding people who need him to rescue them. One day Paar gets a mysterious message directing him to go to a remote island for a top-secret assignment. When he gets into trouble, it's up to the rest of his family—the Incredibles—to rescue him.

Andrews describes who the Incredibles are and what their powers symbolize. "Bob Paar has super strength. Helen, his wife, used to be Elastigirl back in the day. She has powers of elasticity. She can stretch very far, form herself into different kinds of shapes. Violet is their teenage daughter. She can turn invisible, and she also has force-field projection powers. And Dash, their son, is superfast. They also have a little baby who doesn't have any powers.

"Brad set up the powers to reflect the aspects of that type of character: The dad has to be strong. The mom has to be flexible and be spread out in many different directions. Teenage girls, they tend to want to disappear and put themselves in shells. And ten-year-old boys are all over the place."

Bird coaches Craig T. Nelson (Mr. Incredible) in the recording studio.

I Love It When a Plan Comes Together

The idea for *The Incredibles* sprang from Bird's own life. Early in his career, he worked on Steven Spielberg's *Amazing Stories* TV series.

"I wrote two episodes," Bird says. "One was live action, about a kid who got magnetized. That was the second one, which aired right after Steven's 'Ghost Train' episode. It was called 'The Main Attraction.' I'm actually in it as one of the scientists. The one that I wrote and directed and coproduced was called 'Family Dog,' and it was animated. Later, they made a TV series out of it, but I wasn't involved. I was on *The Simpsons* when they were doing that."

Bird acted as executive consultant for *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill*, and *The Critic*. It was when he was working on *The Simpsons* that his middle son, Jack, was born, and the idea for *The Incredibles* occurred to him. At first he thought of it as a goofy movie about superheroes, but he related to the characters and kept thinking about the idea. *The Incredibles'* baby





even has the nickname Bird's son had as an infant: Jack Jack.

Although Bird was having fun working on *The Simpsons*, at the same time he was trying to get several of his own movie projects off the ground. He pitched ideas all over Hollywood, ideas that he was passionate about.

"They are still in a frozen state," Bird says about the past movie ideas he's pitched. "A lot of times they won't let you take the idea somewhere else because if it becomes a hit for someone else, then that reflects badly on them. So it becomes this very convoluted, frustrating thing, and I think that frustration—without my being aware of it—got into this story.

"At the same time I was frustrated at not being able to do what I wanted to do. I [had] a new family, and I was worried that I was either never going to 'make it' but be a great parent—or I was going to dedicate the time necessary to making it but be a lousy parent.

And I didn't want to be lousy at either job. I wanted to love both my work and my family. And the anxiety of those two pressures is what drove the movie—but on a subconscious level. I wasn't aware of it at the time.

It was just an idea that I kept returning to and tinkering with."

Even though *The Incredibles* was nothing but a gleam in Bird's eyes at that time, one of his other passionate ideas became reality. Warner Brothers liked his pitch to develop the children's book, *The Iron Giant*, into an animated movie. Even though the studio decided to fold its animation division by the time *The Iron Giant* was being made, they gave free rein to Bird to make the movie he wanted to make. The studio didn't offer the kind of support that Bird had hoped for in promoting the movie, and the film wasn't a smash at the box office, but critics praised it.

Pixar noticed, too. Executive vice president John Lasseter knew Bird from their student days at the California Institute of the Arts. While Bird was making *The Iron Giant*, Lasseter called and began planting seeds about the possibility of Bird working with Pixar on a film. Eventually, Lasseter asked if he'd like a permanent job, which meant moving away from the Hollywood scene to Pixar's headquarters, near San Francisco.

"It's the first time they've had someone who has directed a movie outside of Pixar direct a movie inside of Pixar," Bird says. "I had this idea in mind, and they weren't really set up for people to bring in outside ideas. They'd always home-grown their ideas. And I said, 'Look, you want me to pretend that I don't have ideas stacked up like planes at O'Hare? I've got a lot of ideas.'"

Once they'd ironed out the details, Bird wanted to bring in several of his *Iron Giant* colleagues—including Andrews—to work on *The Incredibles*. So Pixar hired them as permanent employees, and they all moved up to San Francisco.

Delicious, and So Good for You

When it was time for casting, the filmmakers asked Nelson to play Bob Parr. It's his first acting job in an animated film. Auspiciously, *The Iron Giant* is one of Nelson's favorite movies, and he thinks *The Incredibles* differs from previous Pixar films. "I think this is their first film that has this level of action in it. What goes into those sequences also affects the rating. I think the rating is going to be different from the other ones because of the nature of the story. It's certainly not language or adult material, but it's elevated to a certain degree that takes it into another area, ratingwise."

Andrews says that throughout the process of making *The Incredibles*, Bird encouraged everyone to think in terms of the fantastic versus the mundane. "You have this family, which is very mundane—your normal, dysfunctional family—but they're all superheroes, which is the fantastic. Throughout the story, you're constantly having scenes of the fantastic versus scenes of the mundane. So nothing goes on being fantastic [for long] before an element of the mundane is thrown in, and nothing is mundane [for long] before an element of the fantastic is thrown in. So you have this back and forth throughout the film, all the way to the end. They'll be fighting the bad guy in this big action scene, and the family will be having an argument about what's for dinner. It's very funny."

The goal was to keep those opposites in constant juxtaposition, and it wasn't easy.

"We have these very close, intimate character moments, which I would classify as the mundane, and these supergigantic, sweeping action scenes, which I would call the fantastic," Andrews says. "Getting those to blend was the biggest challenge, because you've got to keep everything real and you've got to be able to have the audience relate to what's going on, or they're not going to care. Telling the story visually, keeping those things constantly going so the audience never has time to rest—they're involved in the characters and then they get blown away by these action scenes, then [they're] back into being involved with the characters."

"This is popcorn with extra butter," Bird says about the film. "There's good stuff underneath it—the popcorn has been fortified with all the necessary vitamins and iron, if you choose to go there. I think it's about



Bird in recording sessions with Samuel L. Jackson (left) and Jason Lee (Below).



a lot of things. It's about growing older. It's about a society that doesn't always encourage us to be all that we can be.

"But on the surface, it's just a blast ride. You don't have to know that there're some nutrients in there—it tastes good, too.

"I like entertainment that works on more than one level. On the surface level, I want to lose myself in a movie and be taken on a trip. The golly-gee-wow part of me wants to be dazzled. But I think the great movies, the ones I really admire, are the ones that have a lot of stuff going on underneath the dazzle. That's certainly what we've tried for here. We had a blast making it."

One more question: if you could have a superhero name, what would it be?

"Don't talk to me now!" Bird protests. "I'm exhausted. I don't even want to have to think up a new superhero name for the rest of my life!"

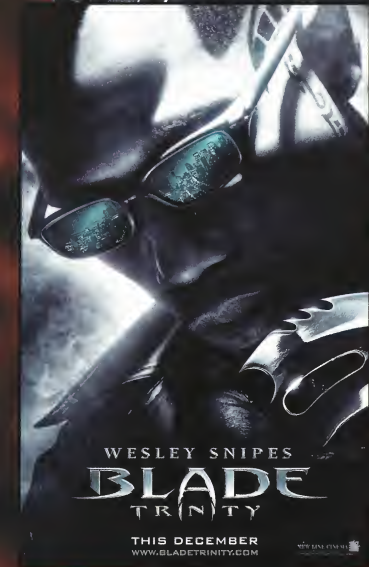
Then he laughs. "Perfect Husband Man," Bird answers in his best, booming superhero voice. "Dad Who Will Never Be Written About Later in a Tell-All Book."

After pondering the question, Andrews says, "Super-Mandrews."

"Pinkie," Nelson says wryly. "I don't know. Right now, it's Mr. Incredible." **AS**



Resa Nelson has sold about one hundred entertainment articles to eight print and Web magazines in the United States and England. A Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association member and a Clarion graduate, she also has published several short stories and novelettes in magazines and anthologies. Visit her website at resanelson.com.



David Goyer still seems bemused that he wound up directing *Blade: Trinity*. The screenwriter of the much-lauded *Dark City* and next year's *Batman Begins* was no stranger to the *Blade* series, having penned screenplays for the first two installments. But when New Line suggested he direct the third movie, *Blade: Trinity*, due out this December, Goyer's list of directing credits was still, well, brief.

Goyer had only directed one film, in fact—a small indie film called *Zig Zag* (2002). On the strength of that project, New Line had earlier offered Goyer a writing and directing deal for a non-*Blade* movie—with a budget, says Goyer, “in the \$15 to \$20 million range.”

So it came as something of a surprise when, while Goyer was writing *Blade: Trinity*, producer Laura Harris suggested that he should direct it as well. “This is something I’d never really considered,” he says, “but, as I was writing it, I started warming to the idea, and then I just went for it.”

The transition from writer to writer-director was not always easy, Goyer admits. “There were some growing pains with the studio. It was interesting because I’d always been seen as a screenwriter before and as a fairly outspoken one,” he laughs nervously. “As a writer, you’re subservient to the director and expected to keep your place to a certain extent. I remember the first occasion when I didn’t do what New Line wanted me to do, and they were shocked. In fact, the first time that there was ever any disagreement about a story point, both Wesley [Snipes] and New Line thought ‘Oh well, we’ll just go to the director,’ but the problem was that I was the director!”

That situation was resolved, though, and New Line was very happy with the results, Goyer says: “When we finished principal shooting on

Twisting THE BLADE

Writer-Director David Goyer
on *Blade: Trinity* by Joel Meadows



Blade: Trinity, New Line liked it so much that they made me a deal to do another movie with them."

In fact, Goyer's experience as a director has changed the studio's perception of him as a creative figure: "Now they don't think of me as anything but a director. They've been sending me piles of scripts, asking me if I want to direct them. In a weird way, it's harder to become a director if you've been established as a screenwriter than if you are coming in as a new director because everyone sees you in a certain way."

Baaadassss

Directing *Blade: Trinity* was a natural progression for Goyer because *Blade* is a character he's had a connection with for ten years now. In fact, the appeal of *Blade* as a film protagonist was obvious right from the start: "We started talking about a *Blade* movie way back in 1994," Goyer recalls. "I was interested in doing a black superhero—there were far fewer black action stars [then]—and I was also interested in writing a movie that had 'street cred' in terms of the action and the violence. I didn't want it to be something that was very polished."

Blade was a natural choice: the 1970s Marvel anthero was motivated by vengeance, talked like a blaxploitation film character, and didn't shy away from violence (see sidebar, page 26). And in 1998 Goyer brought *Blade* to the silver screen with the Stephen Norrington-directed movie *Blade*.

Astonishingly, Marvel didn't expect *Blade* to be a hit and distanced itself from the project. "The chain of command at the company was so skeptical of *Blade* that the first film doesn't even have the Marvel logo on it," Goyer says. But that distance afforded certain advantages too:

"[It] meant that we were able to come in under the radar. Dealing with a Marvel character that nobody had heard of gave us a huge amount of leeway," says Goyer.

As it turns out, *Blade* was a mold-breaking movie, a surprise hit, and, for a number of reasons, an important film. "The success of *Blade* was a real surprise to Marvel Comics and its creditors," says Goyer. "The company was really floundering at the time, and one of the things that *Blade* did was get Marvel out of bankruptcy."

Moreover, Goyer notes, the success of *Blade* had big implications for comic-book franchises. "Before [*Blade*], both Marvel and DC thought that only big hitters like Batman, Hulk, Superman, and Spider-Man would work on screen. [*Blade*]'s popularity meant that [comics companies] could make big movies from their second- or even third-tier characters. There was a real awakening at Marvel," says Goyer.

Much of the new thinking at Marvel can be traced to the appearance of film facilitator Avi Arad, he says. "Avi Arad made them realize that you could make R-rated movies from some of their minor characters." But Goyer is also quick to praise New Line for taking risks and keeping the *Blade* franchise tough over the years. "I don't think *Blade* would have been made by any other film studio because it was very visceral and it didn't pull any punches. I think that this is what the audience was responding to."

"In some ways, the second film was even more violent than its predecessor," he continues. "I think that some industry people expected us to make a PG-13 version with the first sequel, and we didn't. Don't get me wrong: I don't think there's anything wrong with mainstream studio fare, but I felt at the time that moviegoers were after something else."

Superfly

With a second sequel, Goyer knew it was important to create something fresh. "I think that when you're on the third iteration of a movie series, you have to do something different and new, so this time, *Blade* is forced to play off the other characters in the movie." Luckily, Goyer had considerable freedom playing with the world of the *Daywalker*. "New Line takes more risks than the other studios anyway," he says, "but the liberating thing about having done two previous films is that by the time you roll on to the third film, the studio really leaves you alone. By the third one, I pretty much had carte blanche. They totally trusted me, which is something that probably won't happen on my next film with New Line."

Goyer concedes that to some extent as a director he was learning on the job ("I was clearly finding my voice and my vision," he says), he was nonetheless determined to make *Trinity* a very different film from the first two *Blade* pictures. "In terms of the palette and the style of the film, it's very distinctive from both previous films," he says. "I think that's one of the things I'm most proud of." Whereas *Blade II*, directed by Hellboy director Guillermo Del Toro, had a modern gothic feel, *Trinity* "is not particularly gothic and is the *Blade* movie that uses the real world the most," says Goyer.

Indeed, Goyer seems to have been inspired by an entirely different cinematic milieu than his directorial predecessors: the raw realism of 1960s–1970s cinema. "The films that I wanted to capture the spirit of when making *Blade: Trinity* were *Battle of*



Badder than Blackula

Blade was born in 1973 in the Marvel comic *Tomb of Dracula*, written by Marv Wolfman and illustrated by Gene Colan. "A story Len Wein and I did at DC Comics for Teen Titans featuring DC's first black superhero had been rejected," Wolfman explains, "so I promised myself that the first time I could, I'd create a different black character." Eventually, he came up with the idea of doing a chronology of vampire stories, "from the first vampire on Earth to the last. Each story in the issue would move the vampire mythology ahead," he says.

Wolfman planned to write one of the modern-day stories himself and says that as soon as he'd decided to make the main character a vampire hunter, Blade came to him in a second. And in 1973, he wrote *Blade* into *Tomb of Dracula* 10 for Marvel Comics.

Blade seemed like a natural fit for Wolfman's Marvel work. "In the beginning, the seventies dialogue was inspired by the blaxploitation movies of the time, but I kept pulling back on the hip dialogue as I got better at my craft. Otherwise, he was a vampire hunter and fit into the book just fine."

Over the years, Blade evolved in other ways too. At first, Wolfman says, "Blade was all about vengeance. [He wasn't] a crime fighter and [didn't] care about justice or anything else. All that mattered was avenging the death of his mother by Deacon Frost. As time went on and I got to be a better writer, began to flesh him out as a real person. He developed a very understated sense of humor and lived with a woman, which showed he had compassion. I was working hard to make him real."

Wolfman always believed Blade could transfer easily to the silver screen and that although he was created in the seventies, he had a timeless quality. "I told people at the time that I thought Blade could be a movie—the blaxploitation movies of the time weren't that different. I knew he was a good character who could go on forever. There was nothing seventies about him except the surface stuff—his early dialogue and his hair."

Blade was cooler too. Way cool. "Remember, back then all Marvel heroes with the exception of *Blade* wore spandex. I put Blade into a leather coat and [aviator] pants. He was the first hero without a standard costume. Except for his bandolier of knives, he could have walked down Fifth Avenue."





Algiers [1965], *City of God* [2002], and *Bullitt* [1968]. *Bullitt* has the classic car chase, and we have a huge car chase in *Trinity*—I wanted it to have the feel of a seventies film in the way the action was shot.”

Goyer sees his approach to *Blade: Trinity* as a reaction against some of the more stylized cinema action that has been so common in recent years. “The action in this film is much more off-the-cuff and less choreographed and McG-like. In fact, it’s the kind of stunts you used to see in William Friedkin [*The Exorcist*, *The French Connection*] and John Frankenheimer [*Seconds*, *The Manchurian Candidate*] movies.”

Even Goyer’s choice of fight arranger reflects his interest in a sixties- or seventies-cinema look and feel. “We’re using Chuck Jeffries, who worked on the first *Blade* and also did *Spider-Man* and *Gladiator*. The fighting is more real and less polished. It’s not as balletic as *The Matrix*. My feeling about those movies is that we’ve started to see a lot of CG stuntmen, and sometimes that distances the audience from the action. If you watch characters or camera angles that clearly could never exist in real life, it’s as if you’re watching a video game. We tried to stay away from pure CG, and mostly I composited lots of real elements.”

Unlike *Blade II*, *Trinity* steers clear of the ubiquitous Prague, location of so many recent movie productions. “It was shot in Vancouver, and then there was a small unit that we shot in the Mojave Desert,” Goyer reveals. “We have more exterior settings in *Trinity* than we’ve had in any of the three *Blade* movies and also more scenes that take place in daylight.”

“In the first two films, there is talk that the war between Blade and the vampires often spills out into the real world. Well, [in *Trinity*] we get to see it do exactly that. There are a number of scenes where fights and chases occur among a lot of civilians,” he says.

On the production side, Goyer looked outside of genre films for talent, hiring Chris Gorak—who was supervising art director on *Fight Club* and *Minority Report*—as production designer and Laura Jean Shannon—who worked on *Requiem for a Dream* and had mainly done independent films—as costume designer. “What I like to do, if I can, is to take someone who’s really talented and move them up one notch,” says Goyer. “Gorak was looking to do a big show as production designer, and I think we were really lucky to get him. Shannon had never been part of such a large film before either.”

And what does the story hold? Goyer is reticent to reveal too much. “You have Whistler’s daughter in *Blade: Trinity*. In this movie, Blade has been outed by the vampires. The real world doesn’t believe in vampires. Blade has been caught on video by the police, but they just think he’s a psychopath because every time he kills a vampire, they don’t leave any evidence behind.”

“So in *Trinity*, Blade is forced to fight a two-pronged attack from the vampires and [from] the police—and the FBI, [which is] being manipulated by the former. At one point, the vampires fake a Rodney King-like thing with Blade at its center, and tip off the FBI to his location. So there’s a very funny sequence where Blade is captured and questioned by a psychologist about all of the crazy things he does.”

Indeed, says Goyer, “There’s a lot more humor in this film, which was a surprise to everyone. Obviously it’s black humor rather than *Airplane!*-style humor, but it’s there. The humor liberated the film for me.” Some of this humor stems from the introduction of a new character: Hannibal King. “When I decided to inject the character of Hannibal King, I got really excited,” says Goyer. “[Hannibal and Blade] don’t like each other, and that creates an interesting dynamic that we haven’t had in the *Blade* films before. Hannibal is a very funny character, [and] Blade makes for a very good straight man.”

While he wears the director’s hat on *Blade: Trinity*, Goyer remains a writer to the core, still trying to tell the best, most interesting story he can to viewers. He reflects, “At the beginning of the project, I thought, ‘What story am I going to tell that’s new, that the fans aren’t going to be bored with?’ In December, *Blade* fans will find out. **AS**



As well as editing *Tripwire*, Joel Meadows has written about comics and graphic novels for publications like *The Guardian*, *The Independent* on Sunday, and *What’s On*. He is a lifelong resident of London.

Spider-Man 2 Mobile Downloads

Sony Pictures Mobile
spidermon.sonypictures.com/mobile
 Prices range from \$1.00–2.00 for wallpapers to \$5.00–6.00 for games. Sony Pictures Mobile brings Spider-Man and Doc Ock to your Sprint PCS Vision cell phone. In addition to Spidey-themed ringtones, wallpapers, and screensavers, you can download several games, ranging from text-based to 2-D platform-style to 3-D action.



Radio Command Dalek

Product Enterprise
www.productenterprise.com/drwho.html

£60.00 (about \$110.00). Doctor Who fans can menace their pets this holiday season with a twelve-inch-tall radio-controlled Dalek available in several different color schemes. The rotating head and seven authentic Dalek phrases will inspire terror—at least until Fluffy outwits it by heading up a flight of stairs.



One-Fourth-Scale Star Trek Figures

Sideshow Collectibles
sideshowtoy.com
 \$200.00 each.

Kirk and Spock beam down to one-quarter scale with these eighteen-inch-tall limited-edition figures from Sideshow Collectibles. They feature carefully sculpted likenesses, tailored cloth uniforms, and highly poseable arms. Redshirt not included.



Bone: One-Volume Edition

Cortoon Books
boneville.com
 \$40.00 softcover, \$125.00 hardcover. From July 1991 to June 2004, Jeff Smith told the story of the Bone cousins in a highly regarded fifty-five-issue series that redefined independent comics. Now, Smith has collected the whole into a single 1,344-page volume. A limited-edition hardcover features a signed, numbered bookplate, gilded edges, and a ribbon marker.



The Neil Gaiman Audio Collection

HornerCollins
hornercollins.com
 \$13.95.

Neil Gaiman reads four of his more unusual children's stories for this hour-long CD, including "The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish," "Wolves in the Walls," "Cinnamon," and "Crazy Hair." A bonus track features Neil's daughter Maddy interviewing him about writing.



The Incredibles Action Figures

Hosbro
hosbro.com
 \$4.99 each.

Hosbro, Disney, and Pixar team up to bring you action figures from *The Incredibles*. The first wave of basic figures includes Violet and Dash, a villainous henchman, Mr. Incredible, and Elastigirl and Jack Jack.

GIFT GUIDE

compiled by Vic Wertz

The Amazing Stories staff has an informal motto that we use to keep ourselves on target: "It's all about the stories." But for the next few pages, we're tossing that motto out and replacing it with the more materialistic motto "It's all about getting really cool stuff."



The Ultimate Matrix Collection

Warner Home Video
thematrix.com

\$79.98 (standard edition), \$129.98 (limited edition).

Warner Home Video redefines "ultimate" with this ten-DVD Matrix box set. It includes all three theatrical releases with an additional feature-laden disc for each film, as well as discs containing *The Animatrix*; documentaries; cast, crew and creator profiles; and production and promotional artwork. This set contains over twenty-five hours of material, most of it brand new. If that's not enough, a limited-edition version also includes a book and a Neo bust.



Godzilla Plush

Toy Vault
toyvult.com
\$24.99.

This thirteen-inch-tall, eighteen-inch-long Godzilla plush somehow manages to be simultaneously fearsome and adorable.



The Nightmare Before Christmas Board Game

NECA
necaonline.com
\$29.99.

If you've been waiting for a board game that offers you the opportunity to kidnap Santa Claus, you're in luck! NECA's latest *Nightmare Before Christmas* offering gives you a chance to step into Tim Burton's winter land of wonder.



Buffy the Vampire Slayer Cross Necklace

Factory X
www.factoryx.com
\$24.99.

This two-inch, silver-plated cross pendant is a replica of the one given to Buffy by Angel in the first episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It ships in a velvet jewelry box and includes an eighteen-inch chain. Makes a great accessory for shopping or slaying.

The Lord of the Rings 50th Anniversary Edition

Houghton Mifflin
lordoftherings trilogy.com
\$100.00.

Houghton Mifflin celebrates the fifth decade of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* with a new deluxe single-volume hardcover edition. The slipcased, foil-stamped book includes two large foldout maps and Tolkien's hand-colored illustrations of the Book of Mazarbul. A definitive edition—at least until the eleventh anniversary edition comes out in 2065.



Harry Potter's Wand

The Noble Collection
noblecollection.com
\$29.50.

Accia replica! This reproduction of Harry's wand from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* comes complete with an Ollivander's box.



Neon Genesis Evangelion Platinum: 01 Gift Box

ADV Films
www.odvf.com
\$39.98.

The numbered, gift-box edition of the first volume of Neon Genesis Evangelion contains the platinum-edition DVD of the first two episodes of the anime milestone, packaged in an exclusive metallic slipcover and housed in a metallic box sized to hold all seven planned volumes of the EVA set.



Batman Utility Belt

DC Direct
dccomics.com/direct
\$350.00.

Need a place to hang your batarang? DC Direct has created this life-sized replica of Batman's utility belt from the seventies-era comics, complete with spring-activated capsules and a retractable radio microphone, as well as a wood and acrylic display case.

Unfortunate-Animal-of-the-Month Club

Morbid Tendencies
morbidtendencies.com/
botmc-details.html
\$5.00-\$35.00 per month, depending on options.

Here's the perfect club for people who like to be surprised with the unusual. We're talking regular deliveries of handmade, mutant, stuffed animals. Morbid Tendencies especially likes it when you have them delivered to your office.



Absolute Planetary

DC/WildStorm
dccomics.com/wildstorm
\$49.95.

Warren Ellis's unconventional superhero story Planetary receives a deluxe treatment in this large-format, slipcased hardcover that collects the first twelve issues of the series, plus Planetary 0. As a bonus, Ellis's script for the first issue is included.



Plush Alien Facehugger and Chestbuster

Polisades Toys
polisadestoy.com
Facehugger: \$29.99; Chestbuster: \$24.99.

Treading the fine line between cute and disgusting, these life-sized, bendable plush Alien toys are the perfect gift for ... someone, we're sure. The Facehugger is over two feet long, and the Chestbuster uncoils to over four feet in length.



The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King Collector's Gift Set

New Line
lordoftherings.net
\$79.92.

New Line gives you a reason to buy a new shelf for your DVD collection with *The Return of the King* gift set. It includes the four-disc extended edition of the film; a DVD exploring the composer's work on the trilogy, entitled *Howard Shore: Creating The Lord of the Rings Symphony*; and a Weta/Sideshow statue of Minas Tirith. Owners of the gift set will also be able to purchase a companion statue of Minas Morgul.



Jim Lee Superman Statue

DC Direct
dccomics.com/direct
\$195.00

You don't have to be Jerry Seinfeld to have a Superman statue in your living room. This ten-inch-tall Man of Tomorrow statue is based on Jim Lee's cover artwork for *Superman* 204. Like the recent Lee-designed Batman statue, this sculpture is likely to sell out.



T-850 Terminator Maquette

Cinemaquette
cinemaquette.com

Price not available at press time.

This two-foot-tall maquette of Arnold Schwarzenegger as the T-850 from *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* was created with an unusual silicon sculpting process, with a metal and resin skeleton providing the structure. Individually rooted hairs and closely tailored clothing complete the highly detailed replica.



2005 Comic-Book Calendars

Tide-mark

tide-mark.com

\$12.95 each.

Need something scary to hang on your wall? Tide-mark has published 2005 calendars for *Sandman: Endless Nights*, *Lady Death*, *Hellboy*, and *Usagi Yojimbo*. All four calendars measure eleven by fourteen inches.



Deep One Plush

Toy Vault
toyvault.com
\$24.99.

Toy Vault continues its line of Cthulhu plush toys with this Deep One. It's currently only eleven and a half inches of ineffable evil, but according to H.P. Lovecraft, the immortal Deep Ones never stop growing, so empty out your toy box now.



The Lord of the Rings Barbie and Ken

Mattel

barbiecollector.com

\$39.99 each.

Lothlórien—is it that near Malibu? Barbie and Ken took a trip to the lands of Middle-earth and came back as Galadriel and Legolas, complete with pointed ears. Barbie includes a medallion and a crown; Ken comes with a bow and a quiver full of arrows.

Star Wars—Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords

LucasArts
lucasarts.com
\$49.99.

Just before Christmas, LucasArts is expecting to ship *Knights of the Old Republic II* for Xbox, with the PC version following in February 2005. *KOTOR II* is the highly anticipated sequel to last year's game of the year. The battle between light and dark heats up five years after the original, and you're equipped with all-new force powers and new party members to help you out.



Chelsea Morning

Milk and Cookies Press
ibooks.net
\$17.95.

Influential fantasy artist Brian Froud created sixteen new illustrations for this book adaptation of Joni Mitchell's song "Chelsea Morning." A CD of Mitchell's recording is included.



Amazing Stories Subscription

Paizo Publishing
paizo.com/amazing
\$34.95.

Of course, the best gift for a fan of *Amazing Stories* is twelve issues of *Amazing Stories*. Our charter-subscription price is still available, too.

AS

1990



1994



1995



1996



1996



1997



It's Good to Be the Queen!

Laurell K. Hamilton on Writing, Sex and Violence, and Being a Bad Influence

by Dorman T. Shindler

Photo © Gary Gorman



After Laurell K. Hamilton's first novel, *Nightseer*, an homage to Robert E. Howard, failed to reach a wide audience in the early 1990s, she was told by several publishers that there wouldn't be any reader interest in her next book—a novel about a vampire hunter. Eleven years later, Hamilton's Anita Blake series has become one of the most successful in the genre, and last year's entry, *Cerulean Sins*, debuted at number two on the *New York Times* bestseller list. While she's enjoyed rave reviews from various newspapers and magazines, Hamilton says, "You can't buy into any of it." And she doesn't buy into the hype that—with Anne Rice's popularity waning and Stephen King semiretired—she might be the new monarch of the genre.

"I would love to say I'm leading the pack," says Hamilton in response to the suggestion that she may be the new queen of horror. "I don't really think of myself as the reigning queen. Back when Anne Rice was being touted as the queen of horror, [my publishers] were trying to come up with a title for me. I suggested *Princess of Perversion*."

Although Hamilton makes the suggestion with tongue firmly in cheek, her Anita Blake novels are offbeat enough to elude the simple classification of horror. While her literary lineage leads back to the somber vampire novels of Rice, Hamilton's heroine owes more to the hard-boiled, noirish fiction of Robert B. Parker. And though she is skilled at slaying vampires, Anita Blake, under the employ of Animators, Inc., is first and foremost a necromancer. In Anita's world, vampires and other creatures of the night are commonplace, and the ability to raise the dead is an art form inspired by commerce—think contested wills and lawsuits involving wrongful death. For Anita, killing rogue vampires was, in the beginning, a moonlighting gig. Ten years later, it has become a way of life, as she helps city and federal agents who investigate preternatural crime.

Sounds like some pretty solid horror fare, but ever since both an editor and a close friend suggested Hamilton spice up the sex scenes in her novels, the books have become a mixture of horror and erotica. Although she had to be persuaded to add sex scenes to her novels—"it was book six before we crossed that barrier," she says—once Hamilton did so, she learned that "two things I do well are sex and violence."

Perhaps she does them too well, since half of her reading audience complains about one or the other: "Strangely enough, Europeans, almost without exception, think the sex is fine but the violence is too great," says Hamilton. "And the Americans are not bothered by the violence at all—they're bothered by the sex! It's absolutely true that it's okay [in America] to die onstage or in the movies, but God forbid you make love."

Acknowledging the complaints of some of her easygoing, longtime fans, Hamilton says, "If I could figure out a way to fix the [sexual] 'Ardeur' in the Anita books so we didn't need to feed it as often, I would. I'm working on it. But I can't set my rules in place and then break the rules because it's now starting to be problematic [for some readers]. If I don't play by the rules, then who's going to believe in them?"

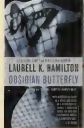
Besides, Hamilton points out, "The sex and violence are only as graphic as need be and are never included unless it furthers the plot or character development." Some of her fans would argue against that first point. In fact, during her tour to promote *Narcissus in Chains* in 2001, they did just that—and more. "People got up in our face about the sex," says Hamilton, relating how they shouted out questions about her sexual desires and worse. "It was vicious," she recalls. "That was the last tour we went on without an armed guard. We had people on the Internet urging others to threaten us in person."



1998



1998



2000



2001



2003



2004

A necessary result of the fame that accompanies being a successful writer, Hamilton's bodyguards were hired for other reasons, too. She's had plenty of disturbing mail—"The safest fan mail we get is from prison because [the authorities] go through it first," says Hamilton—and she has even had strange phone calls from readers who crossed the line between reality and fantasy. One fan who telephoned grew agitated with her for not revealing more information about her Anita Blake novels. "He was angry with me," says Hamilton, "because I wasn't telling him where the vampire hangouts are in St. Louis."

But such horrible treatment and disdain from longtime fans—because her novels have gotten more sexual in nature—merely fuels one of the fires that drive Hamilton. "I'm a contrary person by nature," she says, "I can't help it. So if you bitch at me about something, then probably the opposite result will happen."

Bad Influence

Hamilton's college writing teacher could attest to her contrary nature. After Hamilton's father left when she was a baby and her mother died in a car accident when she was six years old, Hamilton was raised by her grandmother, Laura Gentry. Insisting that Hamilton not leave home right after high school, Gentry talked her into attending a Christian college within driving distance from where they lived. Hamilton, who grew up reading the fiction of authors like Robert E. Howard and Andre Norton, immediately joined an upper-level writing program, submitting samples to the woman who headed the program. "One was a vampire story, and the other was some kind of Cthulhu-esque kind of thing," Hamilton recalls. "So the stories I put in to try to get into the writing program were exactly what I wanted to write. What I didn't realize was the head of the writing program thought she would cure me." After Hamilton persisted, the professor lectured the class on how "all science fiction and fantasy was garbage." Hamilton retorted by pointing out examples of fantasy in the writing of Shakespeare, Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis.

By the middle of the semester, Hamilton had more than half the class writing genre stories. "I was asked to leave the writing program," says Hamilton. Her professor told Hamilton that she had no talent. "She called me a 'corrupting influence' on her students. And now, I've gone out and become a 'corrupting influence' on thousands—hundreds of thousands."

Whether her influence has corrupted anyone could be argued, but there's no doubt that the success of Hamilton's Anita Blake series has emboldened other authors and publishers to take a chance on a subgenre that was once thought to be anemic. Writers like Charlaine Harris (with her Sookie Stackhouse series of Southern vampire mysteries) and Andrew Fox (who writes books about a Falstafflike vampire who solves murders in the French Quarter) found publishers welcoming them with open arms. Yet just as others are jumping on the bandwagon, Hamilton has thrown a monkey wrench into the clockwork of her Anita Blake series. With the last four Anita Blake novels—*Obsidian Butterfly*, *Narcissus in Chains*, *Cerulean Sins*, and her twelfth book in the series, *Incubus Dreams*—Hamilton and her protagonist Anita have become more introspective.

"When I was a young writer," says Hamilton, expounding on the change of direction in her Anita Blake series, "what I did was write about searching outward. I still do mysteries, still solve the murder, and justice is done—but more and more, the idea that interests me the most is the internal journey."

As for her own sometimes painful external journey through the halls of fame and bestsellerdom, Hamilton paraphrases Mel Brooks: "If I am,

now, the queen [of horror], it's good to be the queen! But I don't feel any pressure, because I am still doing what I have been doing for over ten years—sitting down and writing books to the best of my ability." **AS**



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A Merry Gentry Primer

In 2001, Laurell K. Hamilton began a second, separate series of books—so far, nearly as successful as the Anita Blake books—featuring protagonist Merry Gentry: *A Kiss of Shadows* (2000), *A Caress of Twilight* (2002), *Seduced by Moonlight* (2004), and coming in 2005, *A Stroke of Midnight*.

The story thus far: Meredith NicEassu was born a princess of the Sidhe courts but has "lesser Fey" human blood running through her veins. It's a deadly combination that left her as mortal as humans and weaker than most of the Fey. Because she was born into a culture where class structure and bloodline make a big difference in life and where assassinations against full-blood Fey are common, Meredith changes her name to Merry Gentry, flees to Los Angeles, and gets a job with a detective agency as a "magical consultant."

After three years of lying low, Merry's whereabouts become known to the power-hungry Queen of Air and Darkness, so Merry must fight back with the help of friends, family, and her magical abilities.

"The last Merry book definitely had more erotic content than usual," says Hamilton. But she laughs at the comments of one reviewer who claimed Merry had sex with sixteen men at the same time. "You can't even do that! It's not even possible!"



THE MAN FROM BREAKNECK

by Larry Tritten
illustrated by Mark Nelson



They found the Anthracite Cowboy in the Bad Habit Saloon in Breakneck, drowning bluebirds in root beer and eying the cleavage of a tart who sat at a card table across the room, blowing soap bubbles from a little plastic wand. The Cowboy was the only drinker in the place, it being two hours before the Happy Hour.

Magnum and Mini-Man took stools on either side of the Cowboy. They were dusty from riding, and he didn't like the close quarters in any case. He looked from one to the other with a gaze as flat as vintage Kansas, and tossed an X-eyed bluebird into the spittoon at the foot of the stool.

"We been lookin' for you," Magnum said.

The Anthracite Cowboy ricocheted a glance off him. "Why would that be?"

Magnum was big enough to look down on the Cowboy's hat brim, which he did. "Could be business."

The bartender came over. Mini-Man said, "I'll have something blue, if you can see through it."

"Root beer," Magnum said. "Hires. A float. Three straws."

The Anthracite Cowboy looked up into Magnum's eyes. "Big fella," he said, "I feel crowded. Why don't you join your partner on the other side?"

Magnum considered it, then chuckled softly as if at a private thought and did what the Cowboy suggested. There was a spell of silence, and the bartender served the strangers and moved cautiously all the way to the other end of the bar.

"They say you're good with a gun," Mini-Man said, holding up his blue drink and looking through it at the Cowboy's humorless face.

"Whatever you have to say, say it," the Cowboy said, then called to the bartender, "Matt, another bluebird."

The bartender nodded. Mini-Man said, "Well, we hear you do troubleshooting. ..."

The bartender brought the Cowboy a bluebird, and while he upended it in his Hires he glanced at the tart, who gave him a narrow-eyed stare through the wand's sight and blew a huge and tremulous bubble that left the wand with a tilting motion.

"Troubleshooting?" the Cowboy asked.

"Hire your gun."

"When the pay's right and the job's proper."

"We're Non-Guys sent by somebody," Magnum said, "and if you can kill us instead of we kill you, there's a killin' you might contract for that pays real good."

The Cowboy sighed. "You boys hit me where I live. I'm hornier than a cattle stampede, have been for days, and I can't afford yonder lady's price, and God Almighty, I do love campin' in Arroyo Grande!"

By the time he had finished speaking the Cowboy had put three inches of an Arkansas toothpick into Mini-Man's liver and Magnum was going backward in a sort of new-wave square-dance step, his hand going for his gun but followed almost simultaneously by his other hand on his belly, which rumbled where the slug had gone in. Both Non-Guys were on the floor, but Mini-Man wasn't dead.

"You got a job," he said.

"Good," the Cowboy said, and shot him in the eye, then reached out and broke the tart's last soap bubble with the tip of his gun barrel as it floated by.

In Mini-Man's pocket he found a twenty-dollar gold piece and a note that said: *FLAT RABBIT JUNCTION, HIGH NOON TOMORROW.* The Cowboy tossed the coin onto the tart's table, where it spun for a moment before clanking down. "Bijou," he said, "let's do it till somebody cries uncle, okay?"

Bijou put down her bubble wand and stood up, smiling. "I thought you'd never ask," she said. "I was almost ready to give you credit!"

• • •

The next morning, at first light, the Anthracite Cowboy unraveled himself from where he lay twisted in the sheets with his sweetly dreaming companion; slipped on his old cavalry breeches, deerskin shirt, and Stetson; strapped on his Colt .44; and left the room. He felt fit as a fiddle at a summer shindig. Wranglin' minx does that for a man, he reflected.

Outside, the sky above Breakneck was turning slowly blue and the pale sunlight was already promising the kind of day when just sitting on a rock is a powerful chore. An old one-eared red hound came up the wagon-rutted main street of Breakneck, gray muzzle trailing a smell of bacon coming from some window farther along. Somewhere a mule brayed and a rooster let loose. The Cowboy walked over to the livery stable where his big black mare was quartered. Ariel was relishing her breakfast feedbag when he walked up and snapped her on the rump.

"I ain't even eat, honey, and we've got some dust to kick up, so let's get goin'."

Ariel's near eye gave him a look that would have balked a brace of psychotic coyotes.

"Okay, okay, eat."

When she was finished the Cowboy saddled her and rode out of the stable and up the main street past the red dog who was sweeping the plank porch with his tail under the bacon window.

The countryside between Breakneck and Flat Rabbit Junction was called Shadowland after an old Indian legend that told of its getting so cold in winter that the shadows froze to the ground. Today the sun came down so fiercely that the Cowboy's shadow was a slope-shouldered silhouette dragging the baked ground alongside. After a few hours they got into some short grass and a bit of a breeze fanned across them. The Cowboy drank some Perrier from his canteen and looked at his timepiece, gauging that they ought to hit Flat Rabbit Junction just before noon.

They did, and waiting for them, in the shade of a dusty-leaved oak, was a woman on a rangy white stallion whose eyes reminded the Cowboy of certain dogs who had been so well disciplined that they could leave a pork roast on the table overnight and expect it to be untouched in the morning. She was wearing a dress as pink as a window-box rose, inside which each slender part of her was spectacularly distributed; her hair, a full waterfall of it, was the color of nuggets in a prospector's pan, and her eyes the dark blue of slightly stormy lake water.

"You are right on time, Cowboy," she said as he rode up. "I wasn't sure it wouldn't be the Non-Guys."

"Those two had about as much chance as a one-legged man at an ass-kickin' contest."

"Where are they?"

"Prob'ly in the Breakneck town dump."

"Suppose they'd killed you?"

"Then I wouldn't be sittin' here talkin' to the boss lady and wonderin' if she's got any freckles where the sun don't shine."

"Mind your manners, Cowboy. You wouldn't want your mouth to get your ass in debt."

"Ma'am, you are clearly one tough bitch of a son. Now, while we're about it, who do you want me to kill, and who is it you are?"

The woman tweaked her horse's ear inadvertently with fingers the Cowboy saw showed the signs of plenty of hard work but nonetheless had pretty, blood-red fingernails. "I'm Marinade Gunnison," she said. "And you would be the Anthracite Cowboy." She grinned. "I know that curiosity is said to have killed the proverbial cat, but why do they call you that?"

The Cowboy took a cigarillo and a wooden kitchen match out of his shirt pocket, ignited the latter with a flick of his thumbnail, gave the sun an oblique glance, and lighted the cigarillo. "That ain't true, Marinade," he said, blowing out the match with a puff of smoke. "If anything, the critter prob'ly saved its skin with curiosity. Then, if it did lose its life, hell, it has 'em to spare as the story goes."

Marinade smiled at the Cowboy as he paused thoughtfully. "Do you like cats, Cowboy?" she asked.

He gave her back a casual grin. "Well, they say a big cat's dangerous, but a little pussy never hurt anybody."

The reply provoked a sudden laugh from Marinade, who was clearly losing her rough edge.

"As for your question," the Cowboy said, "I got the handle way back. When I was nose-high to a jackass I wanted a cap pistol for Christmas. Not one of them dumb toy guns that use a roll of fifty caps, but an authentic Long Tom with an ejectable cylinder that takes six-cap discs. My dad had always told me if I was bad what I'd get for Christmas was a bucket of coal. ... Well, what do you think of? Kris left me under the bull pine on Christmas night?"

"A bucket of coal."

"Marinade, you are damned perceptive."

"You'd be surprised by all the things I am, Cowboy."

"Maybe I'll find out."

"Maybe you'll live to," Marinade said with a wicked smile.

The Cowboy saw her smile and raised her a dry little chuckle. "I guess this job is no piece of sugar cake."

"I don't know, Cowboy. I guess it depends on how you handle it."

"Well, let's hear about it, then," the Cowboy said, getting serious.

Marinade stroked her horse's ear. "You've heard of Pine Box, haven't you, Cowboy?"

"I've heard the usual. Never been there."

"Name me somebody who has," Marinade said. "Nobody has the cojones. Superstition has it that anybody who sets foot there leaves to die for certain inside forty-eight hours. Are you superstitious, Cowboy?"

"There must be a price on that question, Marinade."

"Eight hundred dollars."

"And what's in Pine Box?"

Marinade's eyes got distinctly colder and stormier as she went on, "There's a man named Prescott—Wollcott Prescott. A ladies' man, I guess you'd say. ... Saying this, her gaze froze over like a winter lake in a subzero blizzard. "What he did is he rode off on my favorite bay gelding, Nut Case, with four hundred silver-eagle dollars he stole from my cedar chest. He was the foreman on my ranch, the Lazy ZZZZZ. I want my horse back, and if you can bring it to me, there'll be four hundred more dollars to match what he stole, and you can have whatever is left of that. But I want you to bring him face down on the horse. Or the fee's two-fifty."

It was immediately as clear as high-mountain creek water to the Cowboy that he was looking at a woman scorned whose fury outdid Hell's. He leaned on his saddle horn with one hand and wielded the cigarillo with the other. "Ladies' man? Is he one of these boudoir dandies or—?"

"He's a smooth looker, Cowboy," Marinade put in. "Ladies' man, yes, but don't get the wrong idea. He's a hard-nosed son of a bitch who came by his nature by way of north Idaho logging camps. They used to play some crazy damned game where they stuck a couple double-bladed axes in the topmost branches of a tree and one of them shook the branches while the others danced a jig around the tree."

The story made the Cowboy suddenly thoughtful. Well, they say there's no easy work on the frontier, he reflected, watching smoke spiral up from the cigarillo.

"Why'd he go to Pine Box, Marinade?" he asked.

"Well, that's what cuts it!"

Marinade exclaimed with vehemence.

"What's that?"

"The crazy son of a bitch is in love with one of the ghosts. Somebody named Dale Evans. So much in love he figures he'll razzen her plasm. I call that major miscegenation."

The Cowboy paused now to ponder the situation. Pine Box was called a ghost town, not in this case because it was deserted, but because it was populated by ghosts of a sort. A few old-timers claimed to remember that time far back when the Disney people had showed up with their high-tech savvy and built the town that had since become known as Pine Box. It had been an experiment of some sort, apparently, and the place was populated by hundreds of individoeols of Western figures from movies, TV, literature, and legend. Not your regular individoeols, ethereal and translucent, but some demiplasmic types that had an unsettling palpability and complexly sophisticated interactive programming, though they were essentially nothing more than eloquent and ornamental eidolons. Then the corporate drovers were called off somewhere else in the world to help corral a plague of their comical anthropomorphic mice that had gotten out of hand, and the town was left ticking in reverse. It got to be known as a real ghost town, and it was said that even the four-footers steered a clear path from it.

But the Cowboy is only nominally superstitious, and eight hundred dollars considerably put the skins on that. Anyhow, he decided, he hadn't locked horns with a worthy bull in so long he had been getting fearful that palmy living would soften his

nature.

"I'll get your man," he told Marinade, "and bring him back ass up, but I am curious about one thing. ..."

"What's that, Cowboy?"

"If those Non-Guys had plugged me, then who'd do this dirt for you?"

Marinade smiled. "If they'd killed you, Cowboy, you wouldn't have been the right man to do it. *Wokarui*!"

The Cowboy smiled. "You've got some style, lady."

Marinade let one hand fool around not too subtly with a curl dead center over one breast. "I'll be here at high noon for the next few days. Do this right and there might even be a bonus in it," she said in a voice like a cool-night bonfire.

The Cowboy figured he could get to Pine Box by sundown the following day if he took it easy, which was his habit. The first leg of the journey, all wizened desert unredeemed to the eye by anything more colorful than an occasional dust-covered clump of rakehell blossoms, was behind him by the time the sun dropped its yoke into the simmering skillet of the early evening. The air turned cool and the monotony of the land gave way to stands of buckhorn and dragglesnap foliage. Coming upon a little creek, the Cowboy called it a day and unsaddled Ariel in a grassy little dell; took a can of venison, a packet of rusk, and a Bobcat bar out of his saddlebag; made a little fire; and ate. After a smoke he retired on a pile of pine duff and slept like a bear, his dreams crowded with pretty pink petticoats that he was tented under in a sort of happy daze until his nose hit the pay dirt of soft sweetdamp in Arroyo Grande.

Morning came up like a painted shout in the east, and the Cowboy was on his way before the sun commenced to bear down with its customary zeal. By twilight time, after a trip whose uneventful nature was stirred only by the sight of a dead Indian providing a vulture's buffet (the Cowboy took a close look, found him shot in the liver, but couldn't peg his tribe—he wasn't one of those who could identify an Indian's tribe by his appearance with the same facility with which some could tell you at a glance the make and year of mechanical horses used in Eastern cities), he topped a runty little ridge and saw Pine Box against a line of low

purple hills a couple miles distant. The town shed a soft white effulgence into the rose-tinted sunset sky, the blend reminding the Cowboy of Remington's salmon and divinity period.

The Cowboy could hear Pine Box tuning up as he approached it: piano music, laughter, wagon sound, and mixed in, a blacksmith banging away at some task. Just fine, the Cowboy thought, for he was raring to get at it.

Pine Box was your traditional Western movie town, of course. The main street ran past a predictable catalog of buildings, all bare-board



señorita with blinding blue-black hair and wearing a satin dress redder than a bullfighter's Reeboks bumped her caboose against his and said, "Would you like to drink out of my pump?"

lumber. There was the First National Bank of Pine Box, the sheriff's office and jail, the Nomad Hotel, the offices of the *Pine Box Post-Epiphany*; the Wells Fargo and Company Overland Mail and Express office; Miss Jezebel's House of Horizontal Happiness; adjacent to each other a Chinese restaurant and the Trencherman's Trough Café and the Witch's Tit Saloon and the Panther Piss Emporium; a general store; a gun shop; a livery stable; a peep-show parlor; and a church (the only painted building, painted an eye-rousing red).

As the Cowboy rode up the main street he was a mite surprised by all the activity: lots of folks moving along the woodwalks in front of the buildings, a bunch more keeping teetering vigils on chairs in front of many of the shops, and scores of horses hitched along the street. It occurred to him then that it was Saturday night. And he was in the mood to jump right in. He wrapped Ariel's reins around the post in front of the Witch's Tit, stuck a nickel in the meter, and went through the batwings into the saloon.

The place was packed: two bartenders worked the busy bar where a mingling of B-girls and customers were hefting steins and tumblers, and the tables were full up with poker players; in a dusky corner the Fast Draw games were gunning down their players. The Cowboy found a place at the bar and ordered a carafe of ginger beer. It came with a tulip stuck in it, and as he plucked it out a señorita with blinding blue-black hair and wearing a satin dress redder than a bullfighter's Reeboks bumped her caboose against his and said, "Would you like to drink out of my pump?"

The Cowboy said, "You can bet on it."

She passed him a spike-heeled shoe as black and shiny as rackateer candy, and he filled it and took a swig. And was automatically in love (more or less), to the detriment, he thought, of his mission here.

"What's your name, mister?" the señorita said in a voice that shamed Swiss bells.

"I'm Horse Eatin' Jackson," the Cowboy said, drinking from the pump.

"Bullshit Barnes is more like it, I suspect!"

"Nope," the Cowboy said. "I killed sixty-two Sioux warriors and ate their horses to avenge my mother who was captured by the Sioux and forced to sit on sharp rocks and drop the family dog into a ravine."

The señorita laughed merrily and touched the Cowboy on the arm, which made him narrow his eyes. He had never had a plasm 'gasm but was eager to join the club.

Then, as luck would have it, a hand that eagles could have nested in dropped onto the Cowboy's shoulder. A face that reminded him of a polluted-lake sturgeon appeared in its wake.

"Fixin' on havin' some fun with Lupe?" a voice like an avalanche of granite asked.

"Don't touch," the Cowboy said, and as was his habit he cut through the mulch by sliding the blade of his Arkansas toothpick into the fellow's gut. The stranger sagged down, his face planted on the Cowboy's boot.

"Ay chihuahua!" Lupe exclaimed.

A few seconds sashayed past during which Lupe held tightly onto the Cowboy's arm; then the killed stranger got up and put his hand back on the Cowboy's shoulder and said, "All right, mister, I'm officially out of the game for twenty-four hours. I'll go now, but I'll be back this time tomorrow, and I'll be fixin' to stick a .44 barrel into one of your choice orifices, savvy?"

Disregarding him, the Cowboy took another drink from the pump and concentrated on looking into the señorita's eyes.

"What brings you to Pine Box?"

"I'm lookin' for someone."

"You found me, Jackson. Lucky us. You look like you need to relax. Would you like to relax with me?"

"Do feminist cowgirls ride geldings?"

"Come with me, caballero," Lupe said, and the Cowboy found himself loping along obediently in the wake of her fragrance. They went through the batwings, back along the side of the saloon, and up a flight of steps. Lupe unlocked a door and lighted a kerosene lamp whose soft glow highlighted a little bed with blue silk sheets and pillows. She put herself in the Cowboy's arms and he kissed her hard. As the kiss sweetened and softened she let out a sigh and dropped something on the floor. Looking down, the Cowboy saw that it was a stiletto. "I like you too much, can't kill you, Jackson," Lupe said. "Turn you in, but kill you, no." She kicked the knife under the bed.

"Tell me what it's about," the Cowboy said.

"She said you would come. Told all the girls, I think. She said you would be looking for Señor Prescott."

"Who told you?"

"Her. Señorita Evans."

"What'd she say?"

"She said that you'd come for her man—that it was a sure thing but he's too dumb to know it. She promised a hundred dollars to whoever kills you."

"Where is she and where's he?"

"He most likely is drunk on some floor. Señorita Evans was in the saloon. Every night she is there flirting with others."

"Damn, Lupe, what'm I gonna do with you?"

"Kill me maybe?"

"Can't do it, even if y're just video stuff."

"Ride me with spurs, Jackson! We can go back to plan one, si?"

"Business before pleasure, Lupe."

"Kill me and I'll just be out of the game until tomorrow."

"I was sure hopin' for a plasm 'gasm."

"Live through this, hombre. I'll give you one that tilts your Stetson."

The Cowboy could feel Lupe's full breasts flattened against his chest and the movement of them with her breathing. "Lupe," he said, "relax, honey. ..." He freed one of her arms slowly and as she still held herself pressed against him tentatively he reached into his back pocket for the device. He switched it on with his thumb and slid it up between her breasts, seeing her eyes widen and her mouth open in surprise as her breasts dematerialized and she was drawn, all of her, in a moment into the vortex of the butterfly box. The Cowboy slipped the box back into his pocket and went out and back down the steps, pausing at the bottom to regard the night sky filled with stars like strewn diamonds. He lit a cigarillo, enjoyed it leisurely for a couple minutes, then returned to the Witch's Tit. His carafe was still on the bar and he filled a glass from it, placing one foot on the foot rail and bending forward in the squared-off stance of a serious drinker. An old-timer wearing a checkered shirt, a leather vest, and a hat with the front of the brim pinned back on the crown—all of which appeared to have been stamped on by Brahmas—gave him a flinty look. His scruffy beard was full of amber stain from too much Copenhägen-Dazs ice cream.

"Fuck you," he mumbled.

"Why's that, pop?"

The old-timer veered slightly as he turned to face the Cowboy. "Do I look familiar?" he asked.

"Can't say you do."

The old-timer reacted as if he'd been pistol-whipped over the back of his hat. "There was a time, though," he mumbled, his gaze wandering.

"On second thought," the Cowboy said, "you do look familiar. Can't

just place you, though."

The old-timer's eyes sparked. "Hell, don't you know I was in some of the best Westerns TKO Pictures ever made! Modeled me from Gabby Hayes. That son of a bitch was from New York, hated horses. Look it up! Me, I was in *Rio Wino*, *Man in a Lather*, *Mail Order Mule*, *Man on a Sawhorse*, *Badmen Don't Play Badminton*, *Wholesale Buyers of Chutzpah Junction*, *Borgman's Gumption*. I even made an X-rated Western, *Pink River*. That one was hotter'n a two-dollar pistol on the Fourth of July! Didn't get laid, but I did get to watch Jonquil Pardee screw the Duke to a dog-tired frazzle."

"I knew I recognized you," the Cowboy said. "Can I buy you a drink, sir?"

"I'd be obliged."
"Another Roy Rogers over here," the Cowboy called to one of the bartenders.

"God, I wish they'd rename that drink!" a female voice exclaimed, and the Cowboy turned to see its owner. Her face was like a holiday sunrise, a river of red-gold hair poured down from under a white velvet Stetson, and her figure made the Cowboy's stare skid in midair: she was wearing a fringed white doekins skirt so short it scarcely concealed the curve of her buttocks and the sight of her panties and a matching halter-style top with a scoop of cleavage so wide that the rosy circles of her nipples could be partially seen with the slightest shift of her torso. All the rest of her was legs, deep long beautifully curved legs whose bare calves disappeared midway into a pair of blue leather boots with tooled designs of roses and six-guns in a band around their tops.

The Cowboy's eyes widened. He had the feeling his mouth was hanging open.

The woman said, "I just can't stand hearin' that name."

"Roy Rogers?" the Cowboy asked, finding his voice.

"Leonard Slye to those who knew him back in Cincinnati, before he took Horace Greeley's advice," she said. "I married the son of a bitch. My name's Dale Evans." She extended a hand and the Cowboy shook it, finding it so warm and soft he almost bit his lip.

"The Anthracite Cowboy," he said.

"I damned near went loco with old Leonard," Dale said, with a smile at the memory. "Apple Valley. Not exactly Dodge City! Every goddamned day the same thing—Roy and Trigger practicing tricks, Roy noodling around with the lariat, then the sunset serenade with the Sons of the Pioneers. The same three or four goddamned songs. 'Cool Water,' my ass! I guess it isn't any wonder that, wedding ring or no, I jumped in the buckboard one night and got my ass out of there."

"Can I buy you a drink?" the Cowboy asked.

"Sure. I'll have a Shirley Temple Black."

After the bartender brought the drink, the Cowboy touched the rim of his glass to Dale's. "A toast to uncommon beauty," he said, looking her squarely in the eyes, "which is always worth a risk or two."



Pilgrim, you want to choose your next words carefully," the Duke said, without bothering to look at him. "A man's last words are often quoted."

Dale smiled into her glass, then gave him back his straightforward look. "That's a real pretty sentiment, mister." She touched her three-strip Technicolor lipstick with the tip of her tongue, which the Cowboy hated to see disappear back into her mouth. His own lips felt dry as a Methodist's sermon.

"How about a dance?" he said.

The black piano player across the room was banging out "Mama, Don't Let Your Cowboys Grow Up to Be Lawyers" against the general din. Dale smiled broadly. "Nobody's dancin', Cowboy," she said.

Then before he could say something urbane he again felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up along an arm attached to a man at least six foot four who had a face that would be hard to forget. It had, in fact,

been remembered for a long time—even since there were Mustangs and Pintos parked on Rodeo Drive. It was a face as hard and lean as a cattle drive, as tough as the odds at the Alamo, and withal as quiet as the Great Plains before a storm. It was the face of the Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, the face of a Searcher, and of one who had helped Win the West—the Ringo Kid Nathan Brittles Tom Dunson Hondo Rooster Cogburn. He was wearing a black shirt, a kerchief tied loosely around his neck, and a pair of roundup chaparajos. He looked mean. He turned his gaze on Dale.

"Dale," he said in his timeless lazy voice, "I've got our horses all saddled up for that moonlight ride we planned on ... unless you're busy."

"Duke," Dale said, a little flustered, glancing at the Cowboy. "I—"

"Duke," the Cowboy cut in in a soft voice, "you got a nice firm hand, but I'm standin' up okay by myself."

"Pilgrim, you want to choose your next words carefully," the Duke said, without bothering to look at him. "A man's last words are often quoted."

The Cowboy became aware of a vast silence surrounding him, not unlike the silence in bear country following the sound of a boot snapping a dry twig. Reaching up, he brushed the Duke's hand off his shoulder and the gesture made the big man step a few paces back, which intensified the silence. The Cowboy saw that every eye in the saloon was on the two of them.

"Fill your hands, you son of a bitch," the Duke said quietly.

The Cowboy did just that and did it so swiftly that the Duke hadn't even moved a finger before he was looking down at the place above his belt where the .44 slug had gone in. He gave the Cowboy a duplex grimace and said, "God damn!" in sheer disbelief.

The Cowboy fired again and this time the bullet knocked the big man off his feet and over onto his back just as if he'd been whacked point-blank on the muzzle with an ax handle. Blue and red stars shot out of his head to tremble in midair. A nice touch, thought the Cowboy.

"Gets down to what the game is all about," he said, and then the sound around him came down like a rock slide as everybody started talking again, the talk loud, excited, and all of one piece.

Dale looked at the Cowboy with a mixture of awe, respect, and

prudence. "Jesus, nobody's ever done that," she breathed. "He's been after me like a blowfly on a mare's back since I can remember." She grabbed the Cowboy's carafe and took a swig from it. "I think I'd kiss you if you weren't a stranger," she smiled.

"Dale, I don't want to be a stranger. I don't feel like one."

Dale turned and called to one of the bartenders. "Newt, could I have a quart bottle of ginger ale. Make it Kill Devil." Smiling at the Cowboy, she said, "Let's go somewhere where we can be alone."

"Fine idea."

Their eyes did a mutual fandango and she bent forward and kissed him very lightly on the mouth but didn't draw back until he'd had a taste of the tip of her tongue, after which he would have followed her right into Geronimo's camp if that was where she headed. He reminded himself to keep both eyes peeled for daggers and derringers.

As luck had it, she led him no further than two blocks down the street and a hundred yards or so back to a little house that was like a candy box inside. Turquoise curtains, a red satin settee and chairs, and best of all a brass bed shiny as new gold. She sat on the edge of the bed and they passed the bottle back and forth, taking a drink and then kissing until the Cowboy felt giddy as a cottontail in a cattle stampede. Dale's skirt was so skimpy that she didn't have to undress but just lifted the fringed skirt an inch or so and slid her red panties down to her ankles and over her boots and lifted the top up over her breasts and furled it back around her throat. At the same time a passel of red hearts materialized in the air around her head and hovered there, throbbing.

"Keep your boots on, too, Dale," the Cowboy said.

"The better to ride roughshod over your mind," she whispered.

As Dale moaned softly under him the Cowboy felt like a farm kid in a big-city soda parlor. His mind was all full of images of soda-parlor phosphorescence, barber-pole candy, and jelly grazilles. When the climax came, Dale's as well as his, she had the heels of her boots aimed straight at the ceiling and her tongue in his hair, and for the Cowboy it was like the breaking of a psychosexual piñata, with sensations like the most exotic toys imaginable spinning through his mind and body.

A minute or so later the Cowboy lay looking at the ceiling while Dale made spidery little movements on his shoulder with her fingernails.

"Who are you, Cowboy?" she asked.

He was silent for a while, then sat up and reached for his shirt, fished out a cigarillo, and lighted it. "Well, it's time for this," he said unhappily. "As you damned well know, I'm after your boyfriend, Prescott. He took some money from a lady rancher. She sent me to fetch him, and there it is. ..."

Dale gave him a long hard look, then laughed lightly. "Cowboy, I've had a price on the head of whoever comes for Volcott, but I was going to cancel it pronto. That dead-drunk son of a bitch has gotten to be real boring. ... Now, can I ask you something?"

He looked at her in surprise.

"Can I take my boots off while we do it this next time?" The question was followed by a stream of little red hearts that formed a circle around her head and went round and round in orbit.

They went at it again full tilt for four or five hours until Dale banged her funny bone on one of the bed rails. At dawn, she gave the Cowboy the key to Prescott's room where she said he would be sleeping off his drunk. "Come back and see me sometime," she said.

"Bet a pot on it."

It was as easy as the Cowboy hoped it would be. He unlocked the door without a sound and went in fast with his gun drawn to find Prescott passed out on the bed. He was a slim man of medium height

with a youthful face he'd tried to give some character by growing a full-size moustache. The Cowboy poked his shoulder with his gun barrel and Prescott didn't flinch or stir. Then he used the rope he'd brought with him to tie his wrists and ankles together. As he was doing this Prescott opened his eyes and slurred, "Wh— what you doin'?"

The Cowboy hit him on the head with his gun barrel and went about the chore. Finished, he searched the room and found a saddlebag full of silver dollars. Prescott wasn't so heavy that the Cowboy couldn't manage to carry Prescott and the bag with a little effort, so he hefted the drunk over one shoulder, picked up the saddlebag, and went to the livery stable where Dale had said Prescott's horse was boarded.

The stable owner, a paunchy old-timer wearing a dirty old pair of Buck Zuccoli jeans, a T-shirt that said YOU CAN HAVE MY CREDIT CARD WHEN YOU PAY IT OUT OF MY COLD, DEAD HANDS, and a Boston derby, met him inside the stable. "Je-hosh-aphot!" he exclaimed. "What's this?"

"He's checkin' out. So are you if you object."

"Hell, do whatever you want, mister. I never saw nothin'."

"Where's his horse?"

"That'd be the temperamental bay gelding three stalls over."

The Cowboy tossed the saddlebag at his feet. "Will you drag that over for me?"

"Sure thing, mister." He gave a little groan of surprise as he went to pick it up. "Damn, it's heavy. What's in it?"

"Brass knuckles. I'm gonna trade 'em to the Apaches for a squaw who looks like Debra Paget."

The old-timer let out a cackle, then followed the Cowboy over to where Marinade's horse was quartered. After tying Prescott face down on the gelding's back, the Cowboy turned to the old-timer. "He owe you anything?" he asked.

"Two bucks, two-fifty mebbe. I'll fetch the books."

The Cowboy stopped him with a hand on his arm and handed him five of the silver eagles from a handful he'd put in his pocket.

Amazed by the gesture, the old-timer said, "Well, thank you now, sir. ... *Vicom Dios.*"

"*Vicom Dios,*" the Cowboy said, and led the horse out of the stable. He took it up the main street, mounted Ariel, and rode out of Pine Box, leading the gelding. A few miles outside of town he found a stand of apple trees and stopped to bed down. Ariel liked apples, and he bet the gelding would, too.

At eleven-thirty the day after next he led the gelding into Flat Rabbit Junction. Throughout the journey Prescott had kept an intermittent scurrilous rant, calling the Cowboy everything in the book and a few fancy neologisms as well, the Cowboy's particular favorite being "bush-wacking back-stabbing snake-hearted son of a hare-lipped sun-damned singles-ad whore."

"End of the trail," the Cowboy told Prescott as he walked Ariel over to the oak where he'd met Marinade. "If you've got anything to add, time's running out."

"You're a dead man, urinal sniffer!" Prescott snapped.

"Okay, you've had your say now. Put a lid on it or I'll do something mean."

Prescott fell to making a lot of snarling and snuffling sounds, but he sensed that the Cowboy meant what he said and didn't use any words.

Shortly Marinade rode up with a big smile on her face. "You got him," she said, giving him a look of admiration that made him feel like a tizwin-addled teenager.

"Yep."

"He's alive," she observed with surprise, noticing how Prescott was struggling against his bonds.

"Marinade," Prescott said in a soft, controlled voice, "it didn't work

out, it didn't work out, honey—she's as fickle as a bloodhound in a blood bank. I made up my mind to come back when—"

"Shut up, Wolcott," Marinade said, and the

Cowboy saw that she had a .44 Colt revolver in her hand. "Thanks for your help, Cowboy," she said. "Now I'm going to kill you." She fired the pistol and Ariel was plugged straight between the eyes, letting out a scream that reminded the Cowboy of one he'd heard when he was a ranch hand and the boys threw a scorpion into the outhouse with one of the hands. The Cowboy hit the ground rolling and rared up to grab the reins of Marinade's spooked horse, one hand getting a grip on her boot and pushing hard so that she flew off and hit the ground with a wild cry, the impact discharging another shot from her pistol. By then the Cowboy had his fingers knotted in her hair and pulled her to her feet, slapped her hard, and took the gun away from her.

"Why did you do that!?" he shouted.

She was breathing hard and fast and her face was an inch from his. "Because I don't have another four hundred dollars," she blurted out between breaths. "He took it all! I can't pay you!"

"So you'd just kill me!"

"Why not?" Marinade flared. "You something special?"

"Jesus, lady, you are as hard as logarithms." The Cowboy held her hair hard and pulled her head back so that her mouth was all but touching his. She closed her eyes and parted her lips.

"What the hell is goin' on?" Prescott shouted frantically.

"You want me," Marinade told the Cowboy. "Don't waste this moment. Make love to me. This is hot! Do it!"

The Cowboy knew what she meant—that when hard feelings between a man and woman are melted by passion it can result in a uniquely intoxicating lovemaking; attempted murder could be a catalyst of a catalyst in a memorably intense experience.

Which turned out to be an understatement lower than a snake's belly.

And yet the moment it was over the Cowboy saw the coldness steal back into Marinade's eyes. Pulling on his pants, he said, "Don't bother to get dressed."

"What do you mean?" Marinade said.

"I mean that was so good I feel like a colt in clover, but I know it was just good once. Love don't stick with you, lady. You're nasty. You tried to kill me. I can't trust you. I'll let you live, though. With your boyfriend there, I'll want your horses, and I'll take your clothes. No doubt you'll dispossess Prescott of his later. I hope they

aren't callin' you Butch if we meet again."

Marinade surprised him by laughing. "I'm glad I didn't kill you," she said. "Hey, Cowboy, aren't you going to miss me? Think about it!"

After he had ridden a mile or so, the Cowboy stopped and got down from Marinade's horse and thought about her question. He took the buttery box out of the saddlebag where he'd put it, shook it, turned it on, and Lupe filtered out, bright, beautiful, big-breasted, and with a smile that was almost luminous against the honey-dark tan of her cheeks. "Ay!" she chirped. "Cowboy!" She swayed toward him, still a bit wobbly from the long confinement.

"Nope," the Cowboy said in answer to Marinade's question. **AS**



rescott had kept an intermittent scurrilous rant, calling the Cowboy everything in the book and a few fancy neologisms as well, the Cowboy's particular favorite being "bush-whacking back-stabbing snake-hearted son of a hare-lipped sun-damaged singles-ad whore."



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Mark A. Nelson grew up in North Dakota with a fascination for wheat, sugar beets, and window-well-dwelling amphibians. Since then he has a career as a teacher, illustrator, and gallery artist, and is currently reinventing the wheel.

SHADOWB

by Paul Di Filippo

Generally speaking, I need only three minutes of concentrated attention to kill someone by staring at them. If I'm feeling under the weather, or my mind is preoccupied with other matters—you know how your mind can obsess about trivial things sometimes—it might take five minutes for my power to have its effect. On the other hand, if I focus intensely on my victim I can get the job done in as little as ninety seconds.

Another factor determining the speediness of my powers is the constitution of my victim. As you might imagine, the elderly and frail and ailing require less effort to kill than the hale and hearty and young.

But no one is immune from my gaze. At least, no one I have yet encountered.

And I've encountered plenty.

...

Now the nation is at war. Or so we're told. I guess that changes everything. A person like me becomes much more important.

...



Sometimes it feels like I've always lived in these few rooms. But I know I've been penned up here for only a couple of years. Still, that's a long time to go without seeing another person, even for a loner like me. It's a wonder I'm still sane.

If indeed I am.

...

The first time I got photos of kids as part of my killing assignment, I staged a strike for three days. Wouldn't use my power at all. There was no punishment meted out by my unseen employers, no diminishment of my limited perks. I couldn't figure out what they intended, how they hoped to coerce me. But then on the fourth day the media did their job for them. I read in *U.S. News and World Report* about a bus bombing in Israel. Thirteen people killed and dozens wounded. The bomber had been a teenage girl. Her photo had been in the pile.

When they resubmitted the photos of the kids, minus the girl's, I went straight to work on them.

...

I call all of the different guys who speak to me over the intercom connecting me with the outside world "Dave." Occasionally, a woman is on duty, and I call her "Dave" too. She's fractionally nicer than the guys, in some indefinable sense, but still pretty blank. They refuse to tell me their real names, of course, or even to supply a friendly alias, so this is my countermeasure. I reduce them all to the same individual. They're just following orders, I know, when they withhold their names. But still, you'd think they'd have some human feeling for their prisoner. I'm helping them, after all, aren't I? Doing good for my country? I suppose everyone's nervous about my taking some kind of revenge against any of my captors whose real name was revealed, if I ever escape. But they don't have to worry about that. I haven't really killed anyone for personal reasons since I became a professional assassin. Killing someone with an emotional or personal connection to me was a sure way to get caught eventually, I believed. Therefore, I have learned to rein in my natural emotional reactions to insults and slights and aggression.

As an adult, committing murder with my peculiar talent meant money, not revenge. (Now, they tell me, my lethal actions mean the survival of Western civilization.) Killing randomly or for personal reasons would've violated my code of survival.

OXER



Having a code is important to me.

...

Sometimes I think about my parents. I was an only child, but they didn't dote on me. I was just an accepted part of the household furnishings, like the couch or the television. They weren't mean to me, just indifferent.

Maybe that treatment had something to do with how I am today.

Still, I never bore them any ill will, and certainly never thought once about using my power on them.

They're still alive and well, as far as I know.

...

I don't know where my current living quarters are located. Once I was kidnapped—by a squad of rough men in my darkened bedroom; I couldn't see a thing—I was brought here drugged into unconsciousness. The place is a suite of five rooms, not spartan, not luxurious, but rather like the rooms in a decent chain hotel. There are no windows, naturally. Something about the atmosphere, the tasteless processed air, leads me to believe that I am deep underground, in some government bunker. The perfect silence contributes to that impression as well. Although for all I know, I could be on the fiftieth floor of some urban tower, immured behind yards of soundproofing. Or in a cabin in the middle of some federal wilderness area. Or on an abandoned oil platform out at sea.

I have a very nice bedroom, a living room, an exercise room, a kitchen, and a game room. The furniture is all quite comfortable. Oh, and of course a quite satisfactory bathroom. I guess that makes six rooms, but I don't think the bathroom is conventionally counted in real-estate descriptions.

The living room contains a TV, but the set receives no broadcast or cable channels. I can use it only with the attached DVD player or Xbox. I have a computer, but no Internet connection. I'm using that machine to keep this journal. The game room features a dartboard and a Ping-Pong table. Being alone, I don't get much use out of the table-tennis setup, but I've gotten pretty damn good with the darts.

The whole place, I'm certain, is wired to the max. Cameras and microphones record my every action around the clock. The tapes must be excruciatingly boring for any Dave delegated to monitor them.

When I'm not performing my assigned killings, all I do is lounge around trying to keep myself moderately entertained. I cook most of

my own meals, using the kitchen and the supplies delivered while I am locked into my bedroom at specific times. (The intercom orders me to retreat to the bedroom, and the door is locked by remote control, a solenoid thunking the bolt home. I have never tried to see what would happen if I disobeyed.) I can order out if I want. The franchised pizza and fried chicken and tacos arrive hot and fresh, which I suppose eliminates the possibility that I'm held in some remote area. Unless of course they've gone to the trouble to duplicate the kitchens and staffs of those fast-food joints right outside my door so as to conceal any clues to my real whereabouts from me. I wouldn't put that past them.

All I have to do to get these meals is ask politely over the intercom that connects me with my unseen captors. I can't conduct frivolous conversations over that channel, but the Daves will attend to my legitimate requests. They'll provide me with books and magazines too.

No newspapers, though. The photos in newspapers are often too recent, and could be dangerous.

...

Of course you wonder about sex. I'm a normal guy in my early thirties, so I have the usual urges. I jerk off a lot in the dark. Maybe they've got infrared capabilities in their cameras and can see me. So what?

I'm only human, after all.

...

The way I was found out was this: Van Tranh had me do a job for a politician. Then news of my existence filtered into government circles, and my abduction was practically guaranteed.

I would still be free if only criminals knew about me.

...

My power manifested itself for the first time when I entered puberty. Just like Carrie, right?

I was a wimpy little kid, always getting picked on. Bullies seemed to gravitate toward me, happy and eager to punch the shit out of me. I never did anything to deserve their ire, except for existing. Just like I never did anything special to gain my power. In both cases, it's just the flukey

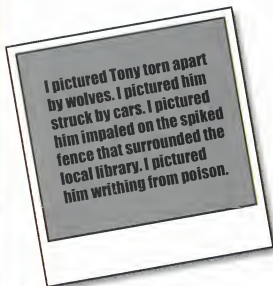
CRIME SCENE - DO NOT ENTER

way the universe works. I understand and accept that completely.

So the year I was thirteen the particular bane of my school-day existence was this porky six-footer named Tony Grasso. Tony had been held back more than once, and now stood out among the rest of his classmates like Andre the Giant among a reunion of Munchkin actors. The day I killed Tony, he had cornered me in the lavatory and had given my head a thorough rinsing in the toilet before laughingly departing with my new calculator in his pocket. I didn't mind the dunking as much as I resented the loss of my calculator to such an oaf, especially since I was certain Tony would probably be unable even to find the on switch.

After I had cleaned myself up as best I could, I went to my next class, and there was Tony, leering at me and silently challenging me to rat him out. But of course I did no such thing. Instead, I took a seat as far away from him as I could, intending to focus on the class and enjoy the teaching. The class was math, and I liked it a lot.

But I found myself unable to concentrate on the teacher's presentation. I couldn't take my eyes off Tony's hateful profile. (Seeing my victims in profile, I later learned, was not as effective as seeing them full face.) And in my raging mind, I couldn't help picturing him dying in a hundred different ways.



I pictured Tony torn apart by wolves. I pictured him struck by cars. I pictured him impaled on the spiked fence that surrounded the local library. I pictured him writhing from poison. And so on.

I always had a good imagination. And all these images were as vivid and real as my powerful imagination could make them. In fact, I felt as if I was actually witnessing Tony's multiple deaths, not just daydreaming them, as if the scenes were playing out before my eyes.

Anyway, after about five minutes of this morbid reverie, I saw Tony keel over onto his desk without making a sound—except for the thump of his head—before bonelessly sliding to the floor. Girls shrieked, boys jumped up, and the teacher dashed out for help.

But there was nothing anyone could do. Tony was quite dead. His autopsy revealed a fatal congenital heart defect, but one that no prior exam had ever discovered.

For a while, I believed that the whole gruesome affair was sheer coincidence. My imagining Tony dead could've had nothing to do with his actual death.

But it took only a few more experiments to prove to my own satisfaction that I had killed Tony.

Of course, I made sure that those subsequent victims were not my fellow classmates. At age thirteen, I knew that a rash of deaths among my peers would've alerted even the most skeptical investigator. Bums

and strangers, clerks, a nanny in the park, and a policeman or two.

They all got congenital heart defects from me. Or fatal aneurysms. I couldn't predict which defect would arise from my evil eye, but it was always one or the other.

Did I say my apartment has no mirrors or other reflective surfaces in it?

The question of who exactly my captors represent offers me endless material for speculation.

The nature of all my victims since coming here convinces me that my talents are currently being employed by the government of the United States of America. But which agency? The CIA? The FBI? The NSA? Homeland Security? Or some even more covert set of initials? Maybe I'm under the jurisdiction of some branch of the military. Am I an honorary marine or SEAL by now? Will I be freed with medals and a letter of commendation once the war on terror is over? And when exactly will that day come? Does the president know about me? Or am I some special project overseen by some unelected bureaucrat to maintain ultimate deniability higher up the chain of command? Which black budget contains the minimal expenses connected with my upkeep? Am I listed as general maintenance on some anonymous submarine? Or perhaps as a box of six-hundred-dollar hammers? I don't suppose I'll ever find out.

More intriguingly, I spend a lot of time asking myself whether I agree with the uses to which my talents are being put. It might very well be that for the first time in my adult life, I am actually performing some selfless acts and helping with the preservation of my nation. Would I have volunteered for such duties if I had been approached openly? Or would I have disdained any such exercise of my powers in support of the national interests, in favor of the pampered life I once led?

Again, it's hard to answer such a hypothetical question. I can only confront and judge my actions as they currently exist, under the current conditions.

Most days, I find I'm actually a trifle proud of what I'm doing. (Although sometimes I sink into a kind of numb apathy at the unvarying nature of my kills.) Maybe this is just a rationalization I have to maintain in order not to hate myself.

Discussing such matters with my captors might help. But this is not a luxury I am permitted.

I think my talent is one that everyone imagines they would like to have.

But believe me, it's not really that wonderful a gift.

Van Tranh was my boss from age twenty-two until I was taken by the government. He was an Asian criminal big shot. I met him at the funeral of some people I had helped. I got into a conversation with him. He remarked about the uncanny way that someone connected with the funeral had died. He said how happy and grateful he was that that person had met his untimely death. Somehow I found myself spilling my secret to him, the first time I had ever told anyone what I could do. Amazingly, Van expressed no disbelief in my powers. Some traditions from his heritage and ancient culture conducted him to believe me. He asked me if I wanted a job.

I had never gone to college after high school. Although I was a smart kid, I found that I just had no ambition, couldn't sustain any goals. I blame that attitude on my powers. The arbitrary nature of death, as

exemplified by my own abilities, left me feeling that life could end at any time, and nothing was worth struggling for.

So I told Van, yes, I'd like a job.

I became his secret hit man. I killed anyone he asked me to. Mostly fellow criminals, but quite often not.

The money was very, very good. And I lived a peaceful, satisfied life.

...

No Dave ever uses my name when hailing me over the intercom. I suppose they are only following orders in this regard too. Instead, they simply call out, "Attention!" Some Daves bark out the word as a command, while others are more polite, even saying, "Attention, please." The woman is one of the polite ones.

Today I am reading when the call for attention sounds. It's one of the brusquer Daves. I put down my book. It's a good book about a guy who is fed up with his life and moves to a little house in the country. Sounds like my situation, except I wasn't really fed up with my old life, and I didn't get to choose my retreat.

The command for attention is followed by the instructions I've come to know so well.

"There is a photo awaiting you in the door. Retrieve it and perform your standard function on the subject."

"Sure thing, Dave," I reply.

I go to the lone door in my apartment. Set midway in the door is a hinged panel. I pull down the panel, and a receptacle big enough to hold a cafeteria tray piled with food is revealed. Of course, the far side of this space is blocked by another panel, this one locked. I often speculate about whether this delivery system is a box bolted to the outside of a normal door, or if the door itself is very thick, like one of those blast doors in a government bunker. This is how I get my magazines and fast-food meals delivered. And also, of course, the photos of my victims.

The photograph this time is generically similar to the majority of the others I've processed so far. It's a portrait of a young man: Arabic-looking, largish nose, wispy beard, disorderly black hair, fanatical eyes, grim mouth. An improbably jaunty scarf is tied around his neck. As usual, there is no information given as to his name or age or nationality. His crimes are not detailed either. All that I need to know is that the people who control me want him dead.

I take the photograph back to my comfortable recliner and go to work.

Something about this victim's impregnable smugness, his air of righteous zealotry, irritates me, and I decide to go slow and be thorough.

I picture myself jamming the barrel of a pistol up his nostrils, shattering cartilage. I twist the gun cruelly before I blow the top of his head off, splattering the wall against which he's posed with his brains. I take an automatic rifle and use every bullet in its magazine to cut him literally in half. I duct tape several grenades to his crotch and pull the pins. I use a knife on his eyes and tongue before severing his jugular veins. And so on.

At the end of five minutes, I'm quite sure that this man, wherever he is on the planet, is dead.

One less terrorist to undermine global civilization. One less Chechen or Algerian, Taliban or Syrian.

Or so I hope.

...

I often wonder if there is anyone else with my powers. If such a being exists, perhaps he or she is in the employ of rival powers, and one day my own photo will fall into their hands.

This is a strangely comforting thought.



...

Maybe you've read about that study that investigated the efficacy of prayers in the healing process. The researchers found out that patients who were prayed for by friends and relatives and who knew about the prayers healed faster. But then the experimenters went one step further. They got strangers to pray remotely for certain patients and never even told the patients they were getting such special attention.

And the subjects still healed faster than average.

That study seems to provide some sort of explanation for what I do.

Except I don't say prayers.

And I doubt the same god is answering me.

...

The way I found out my power worked on photographs of people, on shadows of their souls, as good as if I were standing right next to them, was like this.

One day when I was about twenty-two, I was reading the newspaper and came across this article about a local drunken driver who had wiped out a whole Asian family while they were crossing a street. He was one of those unrepentant types who refused even to admit he was at fault. Said something about the family jaywalking. I actually knew the people who got killed. They weren't close friends or relatives, but they ran a variety store in my neighborhood. I stopped in there a lot, and the owners were always nice to me.

Learning how these people had died, I got so pissed I started doing my thing on the newspaper photo of the drunken driver at his arrest.

On the evening news I heard he had died in custody of natural causes.

This was the mysteriously apt death I would discuss with Van Tranh at the funeral for the store owners.

Just as when I had first discovered my powers, I had to do a little experimenting with this new photo trick. I found out that any photo had to be no more than twenty-four hours old for me to succeed in killing the victim. Freshness counted. There must be something about a person's nature that continually changes with time and makes them a different person than they were a day before when they were photographed. I don't like to use the word "soul," but maybe that's the part that changes, gets updated with experience. Also, the image of the victim's face had to be

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highly detailed. Remote shots of little human smudges didn't cut it.

I wondered if television pictures would work as well. I tried, but the results were inconclusive. You know why? No single image stayed on the screen long enough for me to concentrate on it! When's the last time you saw a person's face occupy the screen for three minutes without some kind of interruption, even if it's only a change in camera angle? And that was enough to reset my efforts to zero. But my captors must've thought there was a possibility I could do it, since they blocked the TV here from reception.

I would've liked to see certain obnoxious TV personalities keel over live on camera. But I just never got the chance to make it happen.

...

Of course I sometimes wonder if I am insane, if I am not alone in a padded cell hallucinating all this. But then I remember killing Tony Grasso and all the killings that followed over the years in such clear and vivid detail that I am again convinced of the reality of my present situation. And I don't believe I could have come up with such a delusion on my own. Mutant soldier in the war on terrorism. Before my capture, I never gave two thoughts to the war on terror.

Now, of course, it's with me all the time.

...

Two weeks after I killed the young Arab wearing the scarf, I got my usual delivery of delayed news magazines. My employer makes sure the issues aren't current, just in case any photos were taken twenty-four hours before distribution. In the coverage of the Middle East, I saw pictures of a public funeral where my victim was the corpse. The text claimed he was a Hamas organizer who had been poisoned by infidels.

Well, yes, I suppose so, after a fashion.

...

I don't believe I've yet mentioned how long I've been doing this job, playing my part in the war on terror. Almost three years now. I was abducted in early 2002.

Is my activity the reason why the United States has not experienced a domestic terror attack since 9/11?

I like to think so.

But I can't be sure.

But lots of times, it seems,
unwitting and greedy
people close to the victim
will provide a photo for
money, thinking, what
harm could it do?

...

It's not as easy to get a suitable photo of a terrorist as you might imagine, but not as hard either. I keep waiting for a picture of bin Laden, for instance, but it hasn't shown up yet. He must be hiding really well. Or maybe for some reason they don't want him dead yet. Generally speaking, if Western operatives could snap such a photo, they'd be in a position just to assassinate the guy outright, and they wouldn't need me. But lots of times, it seems, unwitting and greedy people close to the victim will provide a photo for money, thinking, what harm could it do?

I am the answer to that question that they must never learn.

...

Thinking about souls some more, I find additional comfort to support me in my work. If people do have souls, then I'm only liberating their essences from their imperfect shells, returning them to the source for another try at a better life maybe.

I think I read some similar philosophy once in a science-fiction novel.

...

It's good to be unemotional about what I do. Killing Tony Grasso was really the one and only time I felt pure hatred for any of my victims. After that, it was always just a job or an experiment. Between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two, I estimate that I caused the deaths of only about fifty people. That's only roughly five a year, a record that shows admirable restraint, I think. Even the terrorists don't push my buttons. I dislike what they're trying to do. Civilization doesn't need toppling, especially by jerks who offer only crude substitutes they intend to enact in its place. And I'm as patriotic as the next guy, so I'm pleased to be able to help my country. But all my killing is basically as simple to me as breathing. It's just something I do to stay alive.

...

The photos come to me in random batches. No one can predict on any given day whether many terrorists or just a few will be careless enough to get photographed. Sometimes many days go by and I don't receive a single photo. Other times, I get three or more in the same day.

After killing the terrorist with the scarf, I had a long break. I cooked elaborate meals, tossed darts, and read. I asked for extra DVDs.

But then came a busy period.

I had to kill two or three people a day. Strangulation, disembowelment, explosions, falls from great heights—my imagination really got a workout.

...

And on that topic: I find that I need to envision new styles of death from time to time, in order to keep my mind from wandering during the killing process. Luckily, the modern world offers no shortage of novel methods of dying. The news and entertainment media alone can keep me supplied with an endless flow of imagery to borrow. I do a lot of beheadings lately.

...

"Attention! There is a photo awaiting you in the door. Retrieve it and perform your standard function on the subject."

After the busy period, this is the first call for my services in several days. Without any haste, I walk to the door and find the photo of my next victim.

Surprisingly, the fellow is a middle-aged Caucasian man, European-looking. Not your usual Islamic terrorist. But then again, I read that terrorists have been recruiting just such types recently, converts to Islam mostly, to avoid being easily profiled. I have some vague memories of seeing his face before. He could be a terrorist sympathizer like John Walker Lindh or that Australian guy held at Guantanamo. But in any case, my job is not to question why, but just to make him die.

So I do, using several new methods I picked up from reading true-crime accounts of serial killers.

...

Sometimes I wonder if the nonrational, unscientific, mystical response that I represent to the war on terrorism was not inevitable. The rhetoric and actions of the terrorists are so archaic, so delusional, so hallucinatory and superstitious that the only effective countermeasures must partake of the same qualities. One has to be a shadowboxer to fight shadows.

Even if my powers were a lie, even if I were not killing anyone, perhaps the deliberately leaked news of my government-sanctioned existence would be an effective antiterrorist weapon in itself.

...

My regular delivery of news magazines stopped for three weeks. I asked the Daves why, but they wouldn't answer me.

Of course I immediately suspected that they were hiding something from me. But I wasn't clever enough to figure out what.

...

Having this power of mine is not really such a big deal in the end. I can't use it to become fabulously rich, or to rule the world. At least, I can't figure out any way to accomplish those things. All it did was earn me an upper-middle-class income without much exertion. Then it got me locked up here.

I am forced to conclude that killing people, even remotely and without laying a hand on them, is just not very useful or creative. It's an activity with limited potential for payback.

...

The Dave who summons me today is the somewhat friendly woman, and she sounds unusually nervous. I have never heard any of the Daves sound uncertain of themselves before.

"Attention, please. You have, um, new reading material awaiting you."

From the door I bring back to my chair an issue of Time magazine from three weeks ago.

Inside, I learn the identity of my Caucasian victim.

The Canadian prime minister.

This is what they have been hiding from me.

I should have remembered his face! I study the news religiously. But who could remember such a bland, innocuous, Canadian face?

I trigger the intercom.

"Who are you? Why have you chosen to show me this now?"

But there is no answer.

...

The Canadian prime minister, I knew, did not see eye to eye with the president on foreign policy.

It seems the definition of enemies in the war on terror has broadened.

...

I wish I had studied more about history, instead of math and science. Is this treachery among allies just part of the game of global politics? Is a move like this demanded by the harsh and unrelenting times we live in? What should I do if ordered again to kill another player from "our" side? My native intelligence and haphazard self-instruction only stretch so far.

...

I wish now that I had never discovered my powers, never killed Tony Grasso and all the others.

But it's much too late for that.

...

I'm pretty certain that it's the same woman who summons me the next day again over the intercom. I can't think of her as Dave any longer, and would like to know her real name. But I don't dare ask. Astonishingly, she asks me a question.

"Attention, please. We know you have read the magazine. Do you still want to continue to help us set things right?"

Something in the tone of her voice compels me to say, "Yes—yes, I do."

She sounds relieved. "Very well." She reverts to the formula, as if finding comfort in the rigid protocol. "There is a photo awaiting you in the door. Retrieve it and perform your standard function on the subject."

With some eagerness I snatch the photograph from the slot.

It's a picture of the president.

But there's something else accompanying it. A gift.

A hand mirror. Small, like a woman would carry in her purse, but big enough for the task.

...

I really wish I could be sure about souls. **AS**



Paul Di Filippo is now in his twenty-seventh year of masquerading as an author, having sold his first story in 1977. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island, with his mate, Deborah Newton.



RELEASE THE KNOT

by Patrick Weekes
illustrated by Thomas Denmark

The refuse heap behind the tavern didn't cushion the fall as much as I'd hoped.

"You know," Caelthras said as I got back to my feet, groaning, "the sword dances can train you for this." She was lying by the tavern wall, her blade sunk a hand span into the muddy ground and her pommel quivering from the impact.

There'd been a time when I'd worried that Caelthras and I hadn't even been noticed in our efforts to defeat the Dreadlord, but if he cared enough to send a trio of inhuman bounty hunters after us, we had to be doing well.

"This exact situation?" I slipped on a patch of yesterday's soup. "A scalewright with a scimitar, an ifrit with a pistol, and whatever the black-robed thing with the chain is?"

"Okay, not this exact situation," Caelthras admitted as the tavern's back door swung toward me and the black-robed thing with the chain boldly stepped out. "But Slicing Fish on a String deals with multiple attackers—"

"While teaching formalized movements." I kicked the door shut, catching the black-robed thing in the forehead, then yanked the door back open, wrapped the chain around the black-robed thing's neck, and yanked it face first into the door. "I don't see how a centuries-old sword dance is going to stop a scalewright from knocking me out a second-story window." The black-robed thing gave a vaguely insectile hiss and crumpled to the ground.

"Nice. Oh, behind you," Caelthras added. I spun to see the scalewright, his spiked green form bare save for a loincloth, coming

around the corner with scimitar spinning. He was closer to Caelthras than I was.

"Thanks." I threw the chain at him, and as he sidestepped, he also slipped on a patch of yesterday's soup and dropped to one knee, giving me time to dart in, kick his scimitar away, and punch him hard in the jaw. This hurt my hand quite a bit more than it hurt his spike-plated face. "Ow."

He backhanded me away as he got back to his feet. His knee spikes had impaled a crust of bread and some wilted lettuce. Then his yellow eyes focused on Caelthras nearby. Growling in triumph, he tore her from the ground, raised her overhead, swung at me viciously, and then ran himself through as Caelthras's magical blade twisted in his grasp.

"They never learn," I muttered, pulling Caelthras free as the scalewright sank to the ground with a surprised expression. "Least I can offer a clean—hey!" Caelthras yanked hard, spinning me in place to slice a smoke-blackened throwing dagger out of the air behind me.

"Would've caught you just under the ribs," Caelthras noted as I saw the ifrit who'd thrown the knife.

"That's what my armor was for." I charged the ifrit. My back hurt, and I was definitely going to have bruises from punching the scalewright.

The ifrit whipped out a pair of pistols as I charged. "Fight if you must, foolish blade!" he snarled, his crimson skin shining in the morning light. "Slaying the Dreadlord only brings your own death!"

"If you studied the sword dances ..." Caelthras began, and then jerked as the ifrit fired, her blade sparking as the ball ricocheted off harmlessly. "... you wouldn't need to rely on armor."

"If I studied sword dances, I'd try to prettily defend against some ritualized formal attack and then die complaining that they didn't stab in the right order." The ifrit raised his second pistol as I drew close, and Caelthras chopped through the pistol barrel in a single stroke.

"Nothing personal, best of luck," muttered the ifrit, dropping his pistols and raising his crimson fingers in a quick wave. A moment later he vanished in a swirl of sulfurous smoke. I grabbed the pistol Caelthras hadn't sliced through and headed for the stables before reinforcements arrived.

"Our horse or one of theirs?" Caelthras asked.

"I jogged into the stables. 'Ours is a biter. Any of theirs look reliable?'"

"Try the little one," she suggested, flicking in my grip to point. I sheathed her and moved to a thick-bodied horse with short stocky legs and a black-and-silver saddle that meant he belonged to the Dreadlord's forces. "He looks awful for long distances."

"But good for mountain paths." Caelthras's pommel stone glowed in satisfaction. "I overheard some news before the bounty hunters arrived. We're going to Brythos."



Brythos rested at the banks of a great mountaintop glacial lake. Like all mountain cities, it served as a way station for the Dreadlord's drake riders. It wasn't the kind of place Caelthras and I liked to visit, but according to Caelthras, it had one ancient feature that made it worthwhile.

"Giant bats?" The horse we'd stolen was apparently half mountain goat, and was making his way up the rocky mountain trail with dogged surefootedness. "We're riding into one of the Dreadlord's cities to find giant bats!"

"They're powerful and ancient," she explained, "but they hibernate for centuries—"

"Sure, until the giant bugs hatch."

"—until someone performs the proper rituals to awaken them during an equinox, which is coming up in a few days," Caelthras went on. "They're large enough to carry riders, and wise enough to understand our requests."

"We can't ride giant bats to the Dreadlord's keep." I shifted in the saddle to ease a cramp. "Fire drakes, remember?"

"A large group of bats will fly toward the Dreadlord's keep from the west," Caelthras said confidently, "and his fire drakes will move to chase them away."

"If these bats are so ancient and wise, why would they agree to this plan?"

"But one of the bats," Caelthras continued, ignoring me, "unnoticed in the confusion, will drop us off on the eastern side of Dread Mountain."

"The Dreadlord won't send all his fire drakes to chase some giant bats."

"That's where the news I heard comes in," Caelthras said. "He's dispatched a full wing of drakes to Thershon to put down a rebellion, and it's left his forces thin around the keep."

"Isn't the eastern side of Dread Mountain populated by large venomous spiders?" I asked.

"We'll hire murk goblins to clear things out ahead of us. They know the mountains, and killing the spiders is a rite of passage for them."

"What about the Searing Orb that destroys anyone who approaches the keep?"

"He'll use the Searing Orb against the bats." Caelthras twitched on my hip. "But they're too agile to get caught. While he's focusing on them, Thershoni enchanters will be measuring those attacks to divine the location of the Searing Orb. They'll hit it with an abjuration spell that should block its power long enough for us to get into the keep."

"This is an awfully complicated plan," I noted. "There are a lot of areas where things could go wrong."

"I've had a thousand years to think about this," Caelthras insisted. "It'll be fine."

"The ifrit back in the tavern," I said, changing the subject rather than argue over her thousand-year-old plan, "he said killing the Dreadlord would kill you. What did he mean?"

"Because I put my soul into this blade to defeat the Dreadlord, they think I'll die once I kill him." Caelthras twitched dismissively.

There was a moment of silence.

"And?" I finally asked.

"Superstitious nonsense," Caelthras said. "Now, the bat-summoning ritual is complicated, and it's vital that it go exactly as planned. ..."



The architecture of Brythos had a batcentric theme: bronze bat statues stood guard in the city square, bat-wing helmets adorned the city militia, and bat-gargoyles hung separating the districts. The Brythans talked about the bats like old legends or protector spirits, invoking them in prayers and greetings. It was fairly creepy.

It took me until the night of the equinox to gather the necessary materials without attracting attention. I'd memorized the ritual and made the preparations, and an hour after moonrise, I found myself swathed in a thin cloak and creeping past docks set against the frigid lake, with Caelthras in one hand and a large pack in the other. Soon, I reached caves carved by centuries of glacial migration. The thin air trapped none of the day's heat, and the flagstones were cold enough under my bare feet to send cramps snaking up my calves.

"There," she said quietly. "The third cave. Do you see it?"

It hung from the rocky outcropping that shadowed the cave's entrance in pale moonlight, a bulky blob the size of an ox. "I can smell it," I muttered. It was an offering for the giant bats: some enterprising worshipper had strung up a net with every form of fruit he could lay his hands on, and he'd done it a while ago, judging by the smell. Every insect in the region had been attracted by the rotting fruit, and the enormous mass hissed and writhed fifteen feet overhead, held aloft by a pulley and rope tied to a thick stake wedged between two rocks nearby. "How do people stand that stench?"

"After a few minutes, you won't even notice it anymore," said my noseless talking sword. "Now, hurry. There might be guards. ..."

"Fine." I glared at her, shivering, then set her down with the pack, cast off my cloak, and stood before the cave completely naked but for some bat-themed jewelry and a lot of honey. The honey had coagulated itchy over most of me, inflicting perverse torture on all of my body hair. "O, rats who seek the stars," I declared as I strode into the darkness of the cave, "great guardians of the night, hear the voice of one who—"

"Oh, dear," came a voice from inside the cave. "Another one?" A pale, dark-haired young woman in a flowing white robe stepped out into view. "And you got the honey, too. They don't always do the

honey."

"Er, hello ... Madame Priestress?" I guessed, going by the robes. "I hope that I'm not violating any rules. ..."

"Oh, no, you're fine," she said. "We always stick around on the equinox to deal with people who think the bats aren't just metaphorical."

I sputtered for a moment. "Just metaphorical?" I avoided looking at Caelthras, who was pointedly silent over by my pack. "But I have good information that the giant bats are real."

"They're certainly real," the priestess agreed, "but they migrated south about five hundred years ago in their physical form. Spiritually, of course, they still offer us their guidance and protection."

"Spiritually doesn't help me," I muttered, glaring at Caelthras, who stayed silent. "So, there are no bats. ..." I looked down at my naked, honey-covered form, then at the pretty young woman in the robes. Since I now seemed to have the night free ... "You know, I've always wanted to hear about the bat-priesthood. You doing anything later tonight?" She glanced down briefly, then smirked and raised an eyebrow. "It's cold!" I added defiantly, and then sighed, grabbed Caelthras, my cloak, and my pack. "Thanks for the information anyway." I stalked outside and, once we were out of earshot, muttered, "They migrated."

"There is no way I could have known about that," Caelthras said quickly. "Last time I checked—"

"Seven hundred years ago?"

"—the bats were still there! Look, I know you hate honey—"

"I don't hate honey. I just don't eat it anymore." Back when she was alive, my wife would walk with me to the baker's shop every morning. We'd have honeyed rolls for breakfast, and she'd lick the stray honey from her fingers, then hold them out to me, asking with a smile if she'd missed any. I pushed the memory away. "I hate wearing honey."

"I have a backup plan. There's this dwarven legend about giant badgers that can burrow through solid—"

"Will you just stop?" I raised her and gestured angrily with my free hand. "What is it with you and these idiotic convoluted plans? They never work. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were going to die when you finally defeated the Dreadlord, and you were trying to make sure it never happened!"

The awkward silence was interrupted a moment later by the arrival of a young man wearing honey, bat-themed jewelry, and nothing else. Clutched in one hand was an enormous jagged-edged sword whose blade was decorated with intricate black-and-silver etchings.

He looked at us in the pale moonlight. And then, in a rough, grating voice, his sword said, "You're kidding."

"Run," Caelthras muttered.

"From him? He's a kid!"

"Caelthras," the other sword declared, "Summoning the great bats for one of your little schemes?"

"It's Gorlych," Caelthras shifted into a defensive angle.

"The Dreadlord's First Blade?" I hadn't recognized him without his full-body spike-and-skull-motif armor, but the sword looked familiar. "But Gorlych is older than that." I tossed Caelthras to my left hand, drew my stolen pistol from the pack, fired, and grimaced as the black blade batted my shot aside. "Ack."

"Gorlych is the sword," Caelthras said patiently. "He puts his wielders in that ostentatious armor so nobody notices when he brings in a new one."

"I never realized how annoying that deflecting-the-ball thing would

be to the shooter." I tossed the pistol aside and backed into the cave.

"Come, lady blade," Gorlych called out. "Test your mettle against me!" The young man stepped forward, Gorlych held high.

"The prophecies say that Gorlych will live until the day he is defeated by an unarmed man," Caelthras said, "and until that day, he will destroy all who come against him. Did you undergo years of rigorous unarmed combat training when I wasn't looking?"

"We won't escape by backing into a cave." I looked down at the naked young man's body and called out, "Cold?"

"Shut up!" The young man ran at me, and I lunged in with Caelthras aimed at the kid's throat, shifting my hips to put extra power into the strike.

Gorlych batted my attack aside, locked his jagged ridges to Caelthras, and nearly tore her from my hands. She twisted away and circled into a slice at the kid's knee, which Gorlych knocked down, slashing up at my waist and sending an ornamental bat-belt medallion flying off into the night as Caelthras barely parried the strike.

I sliced at the kid's shoulder. Gorlych jerked his wielder out of the way, drove hisommel into my gut, and nearly took my head off with an upswing that Caelthras knocked aside with a block that sent blue and green sparks skittering off both blades.

"I've got him," Caelthras took over, twisting and weaving through an elaborate defense that kept Gorlych's blade away, slapping his lunges and slashes aside. The kid just stood there, teeth gritted in terror, while Gorlych yanked his arms from one deadly attack to the next.

"The Thershani rebels are prepared for our fire drakes," Gorlych gloated, driving us back with great sweeping strikes, "but they won't expect a wave of giant bats assailing their flank!"

"Boy, are you in for a disappointment," I muttered. Caelthras blocked a thrust and countered with a slice that Gorlych parried. "Hey, kid, does that honey itch? Don't let it distract you or anything." As Caelthras blocked an overhand strike, I caught the kid in the ankle with a low kick.

But even as his wielder stumbled, Gorlych batted Caelthras's attacks aside and forced us toward the cave. The two blades moved through a blinding series of parries, sweeps, thrusts, and slashes that would have put a master sword dancer to shame. Each crisp movement anticipated the opponent's attacks perfectly, flowing into the counterattack without thought or hesitation. On my own, I wouldn't have stood a chance. Even with Caelthras, I was slowly giving ground, dodging back from strikes she couldn't get in to time.

As Gorlych lunged in with an overhead swing, I dove forward, rolled past the attack, and scissored the kid's legs out from under him as Caelthras blocked Gorlych's follow-up strike. The kid fell, but he didn't let go of the sword, and Gorlych dragged him toward us, stabbing and slashing with vicious force to cut off our escape.

"Nice," Caelthras muttered as I scrambled back to my feet. Gorlych snaked through her defenses and took a little skin, a lot of honey, and a bracelet with several dangling silver bats off my forearm with an ugly stab. "Thought you had him there." We were still giving ground, still backing into the cave. Already, the stench of the great net of rotten fruit was strong in my nose. It struck me distantly that the priestess might help, but priestesses didn't usually do that sort of thing.

"Open to suggestions?" I asked quietly, ducking under a high sweeping strike.

"Go for it," Caelthras slashed low, parried a thrust that would have hit me had it not been so cold, then settled in my grip.

I shuffled back. "Gorlych, your skill is impressive."

The sword slashed through a spin that raised an eerie hiss. "I have killed a thousand master sword dancers," Gorlych declared, "learning their secrets before I finished them. None can defeat me."

"Nobody but an unarmed man, right?" I stepped back again, and Gorlych yanked his wielder toward me. "That prophecy says that you live until you're defeated by an unarmed man." I took one more step back, dropped out of a defensive posture, and as Gorlych jerked his wielder forward again, I threw Caelthras.

She spun through the air like a giant's throwing knife, chopped through the knotted rope holding the net of rotten fruit aloft, and sank several inches into the rocky wall.

"I'm now unarmed," I added as Gorlych and the kid disappeared beneath several hundred pounds of rotten fruit and irritated insects.



The pile was several yards wide and as high as my waist, but I eventually found Gorlych under a bunch of flaccid bananas, silent and still, his obsidian pommel stone cracked and dead. Whoever had come up with the prophecy had been right.

The kid was buried under a massive pile of old pears and brown apples, as well as a swarm of insects that gave all appearances of really liking the honey. I pulled him out far enough that he'd be able to eventually wriggle free. "Time for a career change."

"... picked me 'cause I fit into the armor ..." He spat a greasy orange peel from his mouth.

"There's a cute priestess deeper in the cave. Maybe she can help." I grabbed my cloak and pack, yanked Caelthras from the wall, and strode out into the night.

"Nice throw," she said after a moment.

"Couldn't have gotten it off if you hadn't kept Gorlych occupied for so long."

"I suppose." After an awkward moment, Caelthras slowly said, "We couldn't have won with sword dancing alone."

I stopped and shifted Caelthras to my other hand so that I could get the cloak on. "That sword-dance technique you described once? Releasing the Knot? You said that when you and the enemy were deadlocked and perfectly matched in spirit, the way to win was to abandon that spirit and try something unexpected."

Caelthras's pommel stone glowed. "I didn't think you were listening."

"I wasn't, really, but sometimes it sinks in anyway."

"So ... in a way ... we did win this with the sword dances."

"Don't know that I'd go that far." I finally got the cloak on and started walking again. The frigid glacial lake whispered softly with waves formed by the icy wind.

"When we finally defeat the Dreadlord," Caelthras said, "what will you do?"

"I ... I don't know." I paused. I'd never considered it.

"Defeating him will be like tearing down a fence you've been leaning on for the past ten years," Caelthras said. "Could you just go back home?"

I thought of returning to the old town where my wife and I had lived, of taking that morning walk to the baker's shop without her beside me. "No," I said after a moment. "Couldn't do that."

"In a sense," Caelthras said, "part of your life will be over."

"I guess I'll have to see what happens," I said.

"Me too," Caelthras said. "Does that uncertainty make you any

less determined to stop him?"

"All right. Point taken." Still walking, I twirled her through one of the fancy spins she liked.

"We'll figure out another plan," Caelthras added, "something simpler."

"Sounds good."

"Those giant badgers the dwarves talk about—"

"How about Gorlych's personal signet ring?" I asked, holding up a thick band of silver set with an obsidian stone. "Got it off the kid. Think that might help?"

"That's perfect!" she exclaimed. "There's a secret society of illusion weavers ..." She kept talking. I nodded occasionally. The important thing was that we were together, headed for another day, another adventure, another chance to put a thorn in the Dreadlord's side.

But before all that, another bath. **AS**

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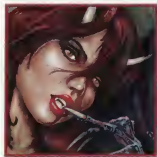
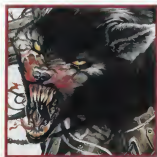
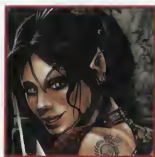
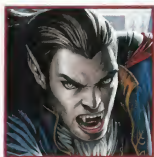
Patrick Weekes's fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Science Fiction Age*. He dedicates this story to Kameron Hurley, who convinced him that the world had room for one more story about a talking magical sword. Currently, Patrick is revising a high-fantasy novel.



Thomas Denmark grew up on a ranch in Nevada riding horses, roping cattle, and playing D&D. At an early age he displayed artistic ability, sculpting clay dinosaurs that were promptly demolished in dinowars. He currently lives in beautiful Tiburon, California, with his wife, Molly, and his cat, Jasper.

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Grafts

Austin slides off the expressway at the last exit, just before the huge barriers that block the cars from running over the work crews extending the concrete another infinity of miles. Up the ramp to the surface street, crowded—choked—with cars; the computer almost hesitates before inserting him into the traffic flow. He has never been to this part of the city. Part? Hell, this whole end of the valley was scrubland and waste two years ago. Even so, the map that appears when he directs his gaze to the icon on the windshield shows him that he has eleven miles to go before he gets to his destination. The traffic icon gives him an eighteen-minute ETA. Relax.

To pass the time, to distract his head, he allows the city info channel into his brain. A chirpy voice, female, rhapsodizes about the shops and stores he passes; a pedantic voice, male, details the city's long-range plan for the valley in polysyllabic superlatives. He sweeps them both in; the silicon memory threads that are woven into his cortex will collect and index and parse them, discount the hyperbole, and add the result to his store of memories. He will never, can never, forget. The next trip will be comforting and familiar. He does not like being a stranger in the place of his birth. He savors his memories.

They go back to kindergarten, time of his first augmenting implant. He can taste the chocolate milk the teacher served at break time, the waxy goodness of a crayon he put in his mouth. He remembers the names of every child in the class. Quinn, Bailey, Dakota, Austin, Austin, Austin. Austin was that popular the year of his birth. He cried the first times the Austin called on wasn't him. And the girls, Taylor, Morgan, Regan, Madison, Madison, Madison. The threads bring up a fact: Madison was the most commonly given girl's name in five western states that year, as Austin was for boys. He had a crush on one of the Madisons, she on him. He wonders if she remembers. Madison did not have augments then.

The car slows, halts. Austin is shaken out of his



On the Memory Tree

by Steve Carper illustrated by David Rankin

reverie, annoyed. A major cross street up ahead, with its own full set of traffic. The system batches: a slurry of cars east-west, a flurry north-south. At the intersection, all four corners boast skyscrapers, stalagmites that plunge the street into deepest darkness. Moving forward by fits and starts reveals and hides the sun, a blinking Morse-code message that spells nothing. He left the Boy Scouts after two boring years, but he will always be able to read Morse code. He thinks about erasing those associations, but decides as always not to bother. Memory is cheap. He adds more twice a year, April and October, daylight-saving-time Sundays, when he also is reminded to change the batteries in his smoke detectors. The silicon threads permeate a maximal three percent of his brain volume, but each passing year brings advances that improve their storage capacity. He has just spent most of a day having his storage nodes doubled; his brain still itches. Probably that's why he's so easily annoyed today.

No. That's a rationalization. Austin's on edge for the very best of reasons. He is getting married today.

And he wants to be early. He wants to find Emily before the wedding, and hold her, and talk to her, and reassure himself that he is doing the right, the very best thing. He knows that there is nothing in the modern world as traditional as wedding-day nerves and the thought brings him a welcome smile. He has every memory of every minute he and Emily have ever spent together, hundreds, thousands, of minutes, far too many to sort through no matter how backed-up the traffic gets. That's okay. They will be there when he needs them, wants them. The nonaugmented never understand this. They think that the floods of memories mean that you continually relive your past and paralyze yourself in the present. Not so. Memories are memories, life is life. But memories are sweet.

Austin remembers the first words she ever said to him: "Do you mind if I shift your bag?" And the time and the place: 3:37 p.m. local time, May the twenty-second, the business-class section of a Starliner intermetro express train. And what she wore: a cherry-red blouse with the top two buttons unbuttoned, baggy butternut traveling slacks from the Farstream catalog, and the floppy companion hat he remembers from the model in the catalog picture, a soft hat that revealed even softer light-brown hair when she removed it later, after she sat next to him.

Emily had shifted the bags without waiting for a reply, so his first word to her came a moment later, after she had taken her seat. "Farstream?" he asked, pointing at her slacks. He was wearing the male version of the same slacks, colored pelican; that was why he had noticed. She had blinked, twice, before looking at his legs and realizing what he had meant. "Yeah, they're the greatest, aren't they? Comfortable." She stretched the word out into four syllables for emphasis. "They're a good color on you," he said. "Better than you think," she replied. That's when she

pulled the hat off. Her hair, the exact shade of the slacks, tumbled out, falling across her face in perfect silky waves. She was beautiful in a casual and relaxed way; she looked as though she could model for the catalog; she looked as if she knew she could but would never be quite that self-absorbed as to do so. He lost himself in that face, in the bright calamine eyes, the palest pink lips, the slight scent of honey and jasmine that mingled with her breath. They said nothing memorable; he remembered it all, and savored every word. Before they arrived at their mutual destination she had agreed to a date.

Austin remembers their first date: one week later on the 227th block of Coronado Boulevard, strolling under the canopy. The canopies were new, a quasipassive solar array that sheltered and cooled sidewalks from the torrid warmth of the sun by absorbing the heat below and blocking the heat above and siphoning them both as energy into the power lines of the shops.

People now promenaded on the sidewalks again, as if this were Euro-land or the Great Lakes Coalition. He and Emily popped in and out of chic little shops, absorbing everything, buying nothing. Memories were a cheap date, she joked. At that crack he pulled her into Il Sorbutti to try a multi-ice. They sat at a sidewalk table, watching the cars and the people, feeding each other tiny intense spoonfuls of the ice, which changed flavors with every bite as the tiny flavor beads burst in the heat of his mouth. He remembers every one: wintergreen, anise, mayapple, clover. He remembers what she wore then, and what they said, and how often they laughed.

They proceeded slowly, dated often. Marriage is a serious thing, the commingling of two souls, not to be entered into lightly. They waited a year before even beginning the required counseling, and waited another year after that. He was sure, she was sure, and yet they waited to be sure. You only marry once.

He remembers proposing to her. He studied the weather reports every day, and the sky channel from the Astrophysics Department at the local university. When conditions were forecast to be exactly as he wished, he appeared at her door without calling ahead and bundled her into his car. He started the program that he had preloaded and held her hand and talked of anything but where they were going. The car took them deep into the desert, a spot he had spent many hours poring over satellite images to discover: a sandy bowl with barely an ounce of vegetation. The night was, as predicted, exceptionally clear and exceptionally dark. He walked her down into the bowl, away from the car, away from any vestige of the manufactured world except for the slight omnipresent glow of the distant city. He gave her a jacket to ward off the desert chill, and spread an insulated blanket on the cold hard-packed sand for them to lie upon. They lay on their backs and stared up at the stars in the



moonless sky, just the two of them and all the universe. "There is nobody else," he said to her. "Not here on Earth, not on the farthest star in the farthest galaxy.

There is only you. I love you. I have loved you since the day I met you. I want to be one with you. Will you marry me?"

Emily cried, and said yes, and said a great many things that only lovers can say or want to hear. They kissed, and then they drew the insulated blanket around them and made love cocooned in its warmth.

Austin remembers the feel of her skin under his hand and under his lips, and every motion, slow and languid and fast and urgent, that passed between them. These are memories too good and too real for a car in the middle of traffic, so he cuts them off with a thought. Augmented memories are like that: clearer, sharper, more affecting of emotions than natural memories, all fuzzy hazy spotty twisted.

After a few more miles the traffic finally thins. This area was empty land, in-between, worthless, just a few years ago. His city has caught up to it and passed it. But so has the next city, and their edges are intermingling here like two galaxies that have been caught in each other's gravitational pull. He gazes at the map icon; the road and the adjacent buildings flash on the windshield, a long, long strip of civilization through the middle of nothing. His destination, Weddings and Keepsakes, is on his right, a huge square of land with a small building along the road and many smaller ones to the rear.

The car slows and turns into the parking lot entrance. Austin fights the temptation to take over the wheel. The car knows its destination, a parking spot next to a memory cabin, his name glowing discreetly on a sign. The letters are keyed to their cars; nobody else but Emily can read them. Her letters glow in welcome, above the adjacent spot. Her car is already there. He has a panicky moment of knowing for certain sure that he is late. His clock reassures him. She is just earlier. He forgets that modern tradition decrees it so—forgetting is still possible, if only momentarily—and tries to read a million meanings into that fact. He remembers then, cuts himself short. Jitters. Just jitters. Odd word, jitters. He fights the temptation to look up the derivation, knows he is stalling, wonders why. Knows why, and wonders anyway. A fine set of memories these'll make, he tells himself. He remembers that his married friends have described this moment to the last jir, and laughs at how stereotypical men still are. He wonders what women all do, and knows that he'll soon find out, and that thought is enough to make him finally crack the door and leave the car.

The heat boils around him, activating his clothing and sending his hat into the low hum of a cooling frenzy. The trees surrounding the cabin provide delicious shade: the lush plantings wafting scents of climes exotic. Directional arrows and signs with his name light up as soon as he steps onto the walkway. He follows them to a door also glowing with his name.

He has walked directly into the wedding room, as he should have expected. He tries to look around the room and sweep it all into his memory and fails utterly and absolutely. For there on a padded benchlike seat against a side wall is Emily and she stands as he spots her and she spots him and he understands instantly and for all time why the bride is expected to arrive first. Austin has never in his young life had a vision to store into his memory as powerful and wonderful as his first sight of his bride-to-be in her wedding dress. It is a vision he wants to burn into every thread and synapse without a single outside intrusion, no parents or relatives or friends or recorders or lights or music. He wants Emily pure as Euclid wanted beauty bare. The public ceremony will occur later,

those memories are important and much to be desired. But later. Now there is Emily and no need for anything else.

"Austin," Emily says, and runs to him, her long dress light as cobwebs, billowing in the slight breeze she kicks up and yet molding to her body, revealing and concealing. The dress is white with hidden refractions that mirror the lilac of her eyes. He sears the memory into his brain in the scant seconds he has before he embraces her and looks into her eyes and is lost.

After a short time they signal and the woman from VW&K enters. She is a duly appointed official representative of their state, licensed and approved to conduct weddings, and more.

The wedding itself takes only a minute. They each recite the words they have labored over and the VW&K woman pronounces them husband and wife. Austin kisses Emily. Emily kisses Austin. Her lips taste sweet. His are dry. They thaw as he pulls her close and closer. His mind is a blank. Fortunately, it is also a blank slate, ready for writing.

The VW&K woman makes a slight sound, but a practiced one, for it separates the two guiltily. She smiles then, a knowing, understanding, accepting smile, putting them at ease. She turns. Emily and Austin, husband and wife, follow her into the next room. A nurse awaits. He seats them in reclining chairs, next to one another, close enough for them to hold hands, which they do. They hold out their other arms to the nurse. He swashes them with alcohol, pricks them with a needle, starts the IV. A fraction of a milligram of a fourth-generation derivative of midazolam hydrochloride enters their veins, starting the conscious sedation.

Austin's next memory is of sitting on a love seat in yet a third room of their wedding cabin. Emily is next to him. A memory flashes into his head. Eight years old, sitting on a similar though less fashionable love seat. Legs too short to touch the floor. A wall screen shows videos of a girl and her cat who emphatically does not want to be held and is wriggling comically in the girl's arms as she struggles to contain it. The whole family is convulsively giggling and making comments. He only can bring up a few of the comments; what he remembers is the room and every person in it, a video of amazing detail and clarity.

Austin clutches at the seat's arm, caught in layer after layer of astonishment, as multileveled as the video-inside-a-video quality of the memory. The memory is not his; it is Emily's. The transfer worked. It is one of the grand ironies of modern life that the process of memory transfer is considered so traumatic that it must be done under a drug that suppresses memory. His augmented memory threads now flow with scenes from her childhood. Austin thought he was prepared, but the reality is otherworldly.

Everybody's memories are different. Some people see the past, some hear it, for others it is tactile or colorful or scented. Austin can bring up every fact of an event, one by one. He does not visualize the whole. Emily does. He knew this, they have discussed it. None of that talk meant anything until this second. How wonderful to have memories like a movie! He hopes she is not disappointed with how pale his are by comparison.

He glances around the room. It is large, larger than both other rooms in the cabin combined, and yet dominated by a king-sized bed so huge that his minicar could make a K-turn on it. It triggers memories of other beds, other huge beds, but beds that seem huge only because he—she—is so little. All his new memories are of her childhood. No reason to trigger memories of sex with others on the first night of their honeymoon. They will share those later. They will share everything. That is what marriage has become.



"Hi. You awake?" Emily says.

"Not me. I'm having too wonderful a dream to wake up," Austin replies.

"You went to camp," Emily says. "You never told me."

"I didn't much like it. Is that all you remember?"

"I remember lots. It's all a jumble. I do remember jumping on beds, though. Did you ever just sleep in one?"

"Jumping is fun. Do you remember the bed I broke?"

"Do it!" Emily's eyes cross as she tracks down the memory. They suddenly widen. "Yes. You're awful. You were so proud of it."

"Fun's fun," Austin says. "Shall we?"

He takes her arm and pulls her to her feet. He takes two steps and jumps up on the bed. She is right behind. They bounce and crash, rise and fall until they both fall together and then they do not get up again for a very long time.

Twice a day each day for a week they return to the sterile little room in their cabin and create lacunae in which memories are poured from one to the other. Austin's experience of his first orgasm as a woman finds his male shell of a body paralyzed trying to react in ways that are impossible for it. Emily tells him in great detail what she thinks of that ridiculous erection that strives to control her brain. In the morning Emily climbs on top of Austin and thrusts as if to penetrate him. They merge, creating muscle memory to go along with these incredible and indelible impressions in their brain. Not all the awakenings are as happy as this. Lives are imperfect, people more so. Each has memories they would rather forget. Share them with another? They would rather die! They do, a hundred deaths of embarrassment and shame, growing closer with each one.

"You had sex with our counselors? Our marriage counselors?" Marriage counselors were always married couples. "And not even together?"

"I was nervous."

"Nervous? Is that the word?"

"It wasn't a fling. It was ... wrong."

"I'll say."

"No. Wrong. Something I never want to do again. Let the memory come through, fully. You're not seeing the whole of it. Feel it, feel the afterness."

The memories claw and tear.

"You ran over a dog, a puppy, and you didn't go back?"

"I didn't realize."

"You saw it. You swerved."

"I did. I did swerve."

"So you knew. Before and after. You looked in the rear viewscreen. I can see it there, red and mangled."

"So can I. So can I."

There are tears and heavy words and turned backs. And then more memories and yet more.

The crisis passes. But they are not the same after it. That is the point. They knew that. Knowing is easy; adjusting is harder. Their world shrinks, to the cabin, to the room, to the bed. To each other.

And then it begins to grow.

At the end of the week, the transfer is complete. They pack their honeymoon finery and prepare to go. They came separately, they will leave separately. Both dread the morning, neither can understand it. Austin gets into his car and begins the lonely journey back to the city

center. He is moody and distracted, glad that the car drives him. A haze clouds the desert air, fitting and symbolic. Austin wonders what Emily is thinking now, whether she is as sad and shaken or merely looking forward to their grand, public wedding later in the day. Only then does understanding seep in. He doesn't know. He has Emily's memories, not her thoughts, not her mind, not her being. They are still individuals, separate, distinct. They are like states in a nation, with boundaries as real as they are necessary. He has much to learn about her; she will never stop surprising him. He longs to be surprised. The future has yet to be written into memory.

Austin and Emily's wedding party is a glorious affair, filled with friends and family. Austin feels close to every single person in the room; he has, after all, as many memories about Emily's half of the guests as his own. The evening is a whirl of exclamations and discoveries: "So this is Sarah"; "Gerry, I'd know you anywhere." Austin knows to avoid Emily's cousin Sue, who has been drinking. Emily keeps his Uncle Earl at arm's length while dancing. But she adores Austin's grandmother Emma and can't understand his aversion to her; they sit at a table and talk about Austin's late mother.

The music cascades over the room. Austin introduces his friends Kim, Jan, Casey, and Riley to Emily's pals Rene, Lee, Drew, and Dallas. They all dance, shifting, sharing. Soon jokes fly about future wedding parties. Their worlds grow larger and more entangled with each wedding. Memories bind, person to person, group to group. Memory trees are the growing world's only villages, only connections, only permanences.

At the end of the evening Austin and Emily plead exhaustion and retreat to their hotel room. The next day will be yet another busy one, as they start transferring their things from their old apartments to the new one they will share. That is the custom now, to start fresh, to live only in places that the couple can fill with memories of a life built together. The new apartment will be bigger, fit for two, and maybe soon for three. Austin feels that it will be easier to enter the future while feeling part of something bigger than he alone. Sharing a life is no longer enough; sharing lives is just as important. He is carrying memories for two. So is Emily. That makes them one. And one day they will come back to their cabin, renew their vows, share their memories again. Memories are sweet. Even memories of the future.

He, they, will never forget. **AS**



Steve Carper's first professional sale was an article on 1969's St. Louis Worldcon. Since then he's published a wide variety of fantasy, SF, and less classifiable work. An SF reviewer and critic for over a quarter of a century, he now surveys the publishing world for his "Writer's Bloc" column in the *SFWA Bulletin*.



David Rankin lives in the Philadelphia area with his wife and son. He is a senior lecturer of illustration at the University of the Arts, and his graphic novel, *The Fallen Vol. 2*, is available in October from NBM Publishing. His work is currently being displayed at the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery in Philadelphia. To see more of Rankin's work, visit www.stopthemotor.com.

HOSTILE TAKEOVER

BY AARON ALLSTON

ARTWORK BY BLAKE FLINN

"It's supposed to be a white cat, isn't it?" he asked again.

This time she did not attempt to ignore the man. She stroked Reuben, the frog in her lap, heard him utter a protracted breeeeep of protest. Then she looked across the dining-room table at the man who wanted to be her tormenter. "What do you mean?"

"You know, movie masterminds." He smiled, trying to be charming. She supposed that under other circumstances he would have been. He was well-dressed and tall, with the bold features and alert eyes she had come to associate with quarterbacks, and his dark hair and olive-toned skin appealed to her Mediterranean sensibilities. "They hold white Persian cats in their laps as they plan to conquer the world. But you won't be conquering anything, will you?" His tone became condescending. "You moved into our territory, convincing our dealers to work for you. I'll admit that you give good value for the money. Our people are still trying to figure out some of your designer ... products. And I still don't know how you put the local cops in your pocket, but I'll know before tonight is over." He made his baritone a little more suggestive for that last statement so she'd clearly understand that she'd have

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additional duties tonight.

"If you were as put out as you pretend to be, I wouldn't still be alive," she said.

He considered that. "True. What the hell do I call you? I assume it's something Kirk. But I hate your nickname."

"Then call me by my nickname."

He snorted. "I'll call you Joanie. You look like a Joan." He rose and moved around to the room's small bar. "And you can call me Les. May I have a drink, Joanie?"

"No, you may not, Les."

He smiled at her over his shoulder, clearly enjoying his position of power, and then turned to mix two Scotch-and-sodas. He let his attention drift up to the painting above the bar.

The portrait showed her back in Florida, back before growing competition in her profession had forced her to pull up stakes. In the portrait, she sat wearing a flowing white gown of traditional design. Her hair was dark, her features classically simple and unlined—circumstances that were, she was glad to say, still in effect.

And in her lap, then as now, was a frog—a different frog.

It was always frogs now. Once upon a time,

Start with an evocative illustration, add the imagination of an extraordinary writer, and you have the proof of the old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words.



she'd kept a menagerie: sheep, great cats, goats, vipers, seals, and more. But they were hard to clean up after and sometimes ate each other. Frogs were more manageable.

Les put a tumbler in front of her. "Drink," he commanded, then resumed his seat.

She drank. It was not an act of obedience. He would not trust her, so she needed him to trust the booze. It always came down to needing men to trust the booze. And it was a decent single malt. She did not surround herself with cheap things. Except frogs.

Les waited until he saw that she'd swallowed and remained unconcerned. He drank from his own glass, then frowned at it. "Tastes odd."

"It's the peat."

"What?"

"It's the peat. The distillery is near a peat bog, and the peat gives this brand a distinctive flavor." She saluted him with her glass and finished its contents. "So what do you want?"

He sipped again and shrugged. "We have your daughter."

"You told me that. You didn't tell me which one."

"You have more than one?"

"Several."

"You're not old enough to have several daughters." It seemed an honest expression of surprise rather than another tedious reminder that she was, by God, going to be in his bed tonight. "Um, her name is Melissa." He loosened the burgundy tie of his suit. He did look as though he were becoming warm. "If you want her back in one piece, you'll hand over to me complete control of your operation, complete details on your laboratory, on how you swung the political power you picked up so quickly ... everything. If you remain useful, polite, and accommodating, you'll keep a piece of the action. If not ..." He shrugged again, this time a mock apology.

Breeeeep, Reuben said.

Les stared at the frog, his eyes widening. "I swear to God I just heard your frog say, 'Sucker.'"

"You did," she told him. "Here's my counter-offer: I'm going to keep you for a while and have a talk with some of your people. They'll release my daughter. When I let you go, you're going to discuss with your superiors ways to incorporate my operation into yours ... while making me a very rich woman with a seat on your board."

"You are an insane bitch," Les said.

Breeeeep, Reuben said.

Les stood. "I'll call her whatever—oh, Christ, now I'm talking to a frog." He yanked at his collar again. His complexion was transcending red and moving quickly into dark green.

He fell, as though all his tendons had been cut at

the same instant. She heard him thrashing around behind the table.

They always thrashed.

Breeeeep, Reuben said.

Les answered, Breeeeep.

They sang to one another while she set Reuben in the center of the tabletop and rose to mix him a drink. She set it before the frog, a small cup holding a few ounces of water and what looked like flakes of oregano. Reuben's tongue snapped out into the fluid once, then again and again.

In moments he began to change—lengthening, widening, paling from a soothing green to a tan-free pink. He lay there, a naked, embarrassed man, holding his hands over his groin, his eyes wide.

"Welcome back, Judge," she said. "Are you willing to be nice now?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Go get dressed."

She moved around to stare down at Les's clothes where they lay, disarrayed, on the hardwood floor. Les sat atop them, eyeing her reproachfully. Breeeeep.

"And, by the way," she told him, "Kirky's not a nickname. Just a misspelling." AS

LES STARED
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Texas writer Aaron Allston is known for his *Star Wars* novels and non-*Star Wars* puns (which have been described as making people want to leap from a moving car). He aspires to be a world-class irritant and wonders about which country will take him in when he is deported. His website is www.aaronallston.com.



Award-winning artist Blake Flynn is based in Olympia, Washington. His work, which he occasionally creates on commission, is included in a number of local, national and international private collections.

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SKY CAPTAIN AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

Written and directed by Kerry Conran

Starring Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Angelina Jolie
Paramount



Kerry Conran wears his nostalgia for Saturday-matinee serials and yesteryear science-fantasy, like George Lucas before him, as a kitschy badge of honor. Yet from the opening strains of the marching orchestral score (which sounds cloned from a half-dozen John Williams soundtracks), *Sky Captain* and the *World of Tomorrow* announces itself less a twenty-first-century technofanboy tribute to the naïve thrills of *Buck Rogers* and *Captain Midnight* than the bastard child of *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, themselves bastard children.

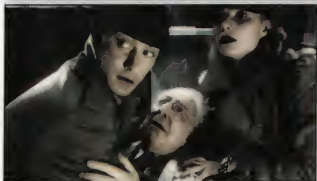
It also arrives as a fait accompli awaiting audience affirmation: the first film shot completely without sets. The actors (and a few key props) were all shot against blue screens with backgrounds filled in with CG. In that respect, Conran one-ups Lucas and Robert Rodriguez (*Spy Kids*), taking their experiments in digital filmmaking to the limit. It's the only respect in which he tops them, however. *Sky Captain* is a hodgepodge of pulp-adventure pastiche accomplished with dazzling technical prowess in place of any actual thrills, tension, or what Hollywood used to call direction.

In an alternate-reality 1939, where a friendly Germany docks its next-generation Hindenburg blimp at the Empire State Building in a New York City that has borrowed pieces of San Francisco, Gotham City, and the Metropolis of both Superman and Fritz Lang, intrepid reporter Polly Perkins (Gwyneth Paltrow) tracks down headlines in high heels and haute couture. She's on the brink of cracking a deadly conspiracy

when an invading force of giant, flying robots lands in the heart of the Big Apple and stomps its way through the city. As Polly dashes between the robots' pile-driver feet (her driving ambition for the big scoop trumps her instinct for survival), ace flier Joe "Sky Captain" Sullivan (Jude Law) swoops down in a fighter plane tricked out with more gadgets than Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and hotdogs through the jungle of robot limbs until he fells one of the juggernauts. From that moment on, former lovers turned sniping partners Joe and Polly follow a trail of mechanical marvels, missing scientists, and enigmatic clues to a hothouse jungle high in the Himalayas and a megalomaniacal scheme with delusions of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne.

Conran replicates the gauzy, soft-focus glamour of Hollywood's high-fashion star vehicles of the late 1930s, the *Iran Giant* technology ripped from the covers of pulp-science-fiction novels and magazines of the 1940s, and the impossible scale of the larger-than-life art-deco architecture borrowed from comic books. The entire spectacle is viewed through a pastel color scheme that resembles nothing less than the steely blue-gray of yesteryear black-and-white hand-shaded with colored pencils.

Jude Law, whose matinee-idol looks and the twinkle in his eye make him perfect as the boyishly rash and devilishly dashing rascal of a hero, and Gwyneth Paltrow, perfectly coiffed and impeccably coiffured as the brassy and sassy blonde newspaper reporter, are as pretty as the



pictures surrounding them. They carry just about as much heft, too, as they stroll through Conran's pastiche, smirking, winking, and rolling their eyes to give the illusion of sparks. The dialogue reaches for the snap of the screwball sparring of the sexes of 1930s dialogue but settles for playground bantering, and Conran writes it all in quotation marks.

Luckily, Angelina Jolie finally arrives as Captain Franky Cook, the commander of an aircraft carrier in the clouds. She teaches these pups how the big dogs play larger-than-life roles and even jolts Law to life briefly with her flirtations (Paltrow's pouting response hardly convinces us she's the Lois Lane of New York City). Giovanni Ribisi brings some snap to his role as the gum-chewing junior-genius mechanic and wunderkind inventor in Joe's "private army for hire," and Laurence Olivier is suitably unsettling in his ominous postmortem "holographic" appearance.

At its best, *Sky Captain* is a feature-length Fleischer Brothers Superman cartoon by way of Terry and the Pirates—it's a goofy science-fiction adventure that devolves into the contrived naiveté of its pulp roots and cliffhanger silliness. At its worst, it's a series of dazzling images more impressive as freeze-frame works of art than moving pictures and an utterly bloodless exercise in nostalgia.

—Sean Axmaker



Photo © Universal Pictures

THUNDERBIRDS

Directed by Jonathan Frakes

Written by William Osborne and Michael McCullers

Starring Brady Corbet, Sophia Myles, Ben Kingsley
Universal



The past decade has not been particularly kind to the *Thunderbirds*. For their run on Fox in 1994, the hour-long shows were hacked by half, with new music and dialogue tracks laid over the sanitized results. Later that same year, UPN did an even worse hatchet job; retitled *Turbo-Charged Thunderbirds*, the new show featured live-action footage of two teens in "Hacker Command"—formerly *Thunderbird 5*—interacting with the cannibalized 1960s footage, which now sported lame ironic jokes instead of the original dialogue.

While not as spectacularly awful as the "turbo-charged" version of the classic Gerry Anderson TV series, the recent Universal film *Thunderbirds* fails to capitalize on the terrific concept of International Rescue—a family devoted to saving lives through the use of its fleet of high-tech vehicles. Instead of a thrilling tale of high adventure and daring, last-minute rescues, Universal serves up a dreary teen flick that's mostly warmed-over *Spy Kids*, with a few dashes of *Hame Alane* and *Austin Powers* tossed in for good measure.

Only the youngest kids will applaud the efforts of mopey Alan Tracy (Brady Corbet, of *Thirteen*) to defeat the nefarious Hood (Ben Kingsley) and become part of the family rescue business. More savvy moviegoers can pass the time marveling at the film's pervasive pulp-style racism and pondering the purpose in a kids' flick of the creepy buttocks-focused shots of women climbing down ladders or up hills. Wonderful turns by Sophia Myles (*Underworld*, *From Hell*) as superspy Lady Penelope and Ron Cook (*Chocolat*, *24 Hour Party People*) as her butler, Parker, save *Thunderbirds* from total tedium, but even their fine work is undercut by cartoonish sound effects during their fight scenes and a few too many irony-drenched lines and winks to the camera.

—James Lowder

Science-fiction kitsch with production-design fantasies:

- *Barbarella* (1968)
- *Zardoz* (1974)
- *Flash Gordon* (1980)

Three much better kids' adventure flicks:

- *Spy Kids* (2001)
- *The Monster Squad* (1987)
- *Castle in the Sky* (1986)



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EXORCIST: THE BEGINNING

Directed by Renny Harlin

Written by Alexi Hawley, story by William Wisher and Caleb Carr

Starring Stellan Skarsgård, Izabella Scorupca, James D'Arcy
Warner



Although William Friedkin's 1973 adaptation of William Peter Blatty's 1971 novel *The Exorcist* is remembered largely for the foul-mouthed theatrics of its third act, it's actually the somber slow burn of the film's first ninety minutes that makes the whole experience so unforgettable. Long before the pea soup starts flying, Friedkin carefully assembles a plausibly mundane approximation of reality into which he only gradually introduces the hosts of Hell. It's almost as if Friedkin's camera itself is having as much trouble coming to grips with the notion that what's really troubling young Regan MacNeil is Regan's shell-shocked mother (memorably portrayed by the convincingly bleary-eyed Ellen Burstyn). By the time everyone is finally forced to accept the terrible truth, we're already scared out of our wits and driven over the edge by the stings of a thick swarm of tiny, dark omens. The nauseating fireworks of the finale are necessary only to insure we never muster the presence of mind to ponder the film's dubious, Inquisition-era theology.

Exorcist: The Beginning, on the other hand, opens with the upside-down crucifixion of no fewer than a hundred thousand Christian pilgrims. A prequel to the 1973 effort, *Exorcist: The Beginning* follows a young Lankester Merrin (the titular priest played by Max von Sydow in the original) as he journeys to East Africa to investigate the recently unearthed ruins of an ornate Christian church built hundreds of years before any Christian should have set foot in the region. Once he arrives, Merrin (portrayed this time by Stellan Skarsgård) confronts a small army of scenes, situations, and stock characters recruited from other, better films including: clumsy flashbacks to Nazi atrocities, Catholic priests who keep dark secrets, an archeologist driven mad by his discoveries and—finally—Pazuzu, the very same demon he'll battle in the MacNeils' Georgetown apartment twenty-five years later.

In a vain attempt to give the actors something that isn't nakedly inane to talk about in the press interviews, director Renny Harlin (*Cutthroat Island*, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*) and screenwriter Alexi Hawley sketch out a wisp of a subplot that revolves around Merrin's struggle to regain his lost faith in God. But watching Merrin wrestle with his inner demons is like watching Hulk Hogan wrestle Rowdy Roddy Piper—the twists and turns are absurdly melodramatic, and the outcome is rigged from the opening bell.

—Ray Winninger

Good devil movies you probably haven't seen:

- *Hoxan* (1922)
- *The Devil Rides Out* (1968)
- *The Exorcist III* (1990)



CODE 46

Directed by Michael Winterbottom

Written by Frank Cottrell Boyce

Starring Tim Robbins, Samantha Morton
United Artists



The future of *Code 46*, Michael Winterbottom's dispassionate study in alienation, social regimentation, and economic disparity isn't postapocalypse, it's post-genetic engineering gone mad. Cities have become sleek, sterile, gated communities with a gene pool so manipulated that you need to swab potential partners to confirm that they aren't your genetic siblings. The colorless, emotionally stifling environment is watched over by "the Sphinx" (Big Brother as enigmatic, all-knowing cyborg). Those who defy the social controls are relegated to the outside, a desert world sucked dry of resources where shanties and tent cities house the impoverished have-nots.

In this culturally homogenized world, an amiable but impersonal empathic detective (Tim Robbins, channeling William Hurt with his gentle-yet-firm control) investigates a case of forged "papelles" (the film's equivalent of *Cosmopolis*'s letters of transit) and falls for his prime suspect (Samantha Morton, best known as the "precog" Agatha in *Minority Report*), a lively, rebellious working-class plebeian in a world of willing automatons. Suffice it to say that *Code 46* is neither a mystery nor an erotic drama, but a speculative social commentary that borrows heavily from *Gattaca*, 1984, *Brave New World*, and to some extent the urban future of *Blade Runner*, which Winterbottom creates out of the present in contemporary Shanghai and Hong Kong.

Winterbottom (*24 Hour Party People*, *In This World*) is more interested in texture than explanation, and he astutely relegates the futurism to the background of the story. But he never manages to motivate their relationship with either sexual heat or romantic sparks. Their unsanctioned bout of recreational procreation comes off as a gesture of personal defiance and Robbins's odyssey to "rescue" Morton from the memory-manipulations of the Sphinx is motivated not by chivalry but his determination not to let them take away that one night off the grid. It doesn't relieve the emotionally smothered atmosphere, but it does give the otherwise familiar irony of the climax an intellectual resonance.

—Sean Axmaker

Big Brother is still watching you:

- *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984)
- *Brazil* (1985)
- *The End of Violence* (1997)



ALIEN VS. PREDATOR

ALIEN VS. PREDATOR

Written and directed by Paul W.S. Anderson
 Story by Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett
 Starring Sanaa Lathan and Lance Henriksen
 20th Century Fox



There's no doubt about what kind of movie the producers of *Alien vs. Predator* had in mind when they placed director-screenwriter Paul W.S. Anderson (*Mortal Kombat*, *Resident Evil*) at the helm. Here is a director who knows his business and what is expected of him, and sure enough, *Alien vs. Predator* remains truer to the spirit of its Nintendo-game namesake than to any other source material. Fans of the long-running graphic-novel series or either of the moody, dark-hued film franchises should just shut their eyes. Anyone with a yen for cotton candy or roller coasters could do a lot worse, but this faint praise is all that *Alien vs. Predator* earns.

Alien vs. Predator's papier-mâché cast speaks entirely in one-liners and catch phrases, expressing their narrowly defined characters with the straightest faces they can muster. Each is dispatched in a predictable arc, based on the strength of their relationship to Alexa Woods (Sanaa Lathan, of *Blode*). Anderson is more interested in providing a rich environment for his real stars to wreak mayhem, and he wastes no time in hustling us all to the scene of the action. He's in full-on video-game mode, particularly in the film's middle section, which finds our human heroes caught in a constantly shifting maze of stone corridors. This is *Alien vs. Predator's* most successful sequence, squeezing maximum juice out of the sub-Geiger sets and generating occasional fits of real tension.

Once the alien battle begins, however, the action moves so fast that it's more disorienting than exciting, a distorted blur of gray armor and serpentine skin. Elsewhere, the CG effects are impressive, such as in the

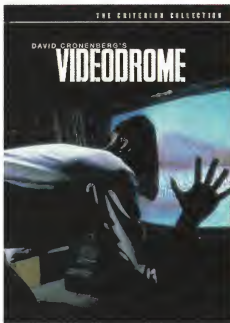
slow awakening of the frozen queen and our first glance of the towering, forbidding underground pyramid. The horrible double-lipped maw of the predator has never looked more disturbing, and the squirming facehuggers are as sickeningly organic as in *Alien* sagas past. Despite the juicy reputation of the film's predecessors, the gore in *Alien vs. Predator* has been dumbed down to PG-13 level, but there's still enough slime and green blood to satisfy the preteen within us all.

While both the *Alien* and *Predator* films walked a narrow line between genres, *Alien vs. Predator* takes a final flying leap into pure action, leaving horror behind. Even with a considerable human body count, the focus here is on the enmity between monsters, replacing any hint of the sinister with copious explosions. For those who feel tempted, *Alien vs. Predator* should be experienced in the theater, where the big, dumb action can be enjoyed for its own sake. The DVD release should prove an anemic alternative. After all, a darkened living room can provide a fine atmosphere for something eerie, but *Alien vs. Predator* has jettisoned the fear in favor of a hyperactive ride through a pinball machine.

—Fred Beldin

More boneheaded monster duels:

- King Kong vs. Godzilla (1962)
- The Werewolf vs. the Vampire Woman (1971)
- Dracula vs. Frankenstein (1971)



Photos © Universal Pictures

VIDEODROME

Written and directed by David Cronenberg
Starring James Woods, Deborah Harry
Criterion, 2 DVDs, \$39.95



It's been more than twenty years since David Cronenberg's first masterpiece drilled its mutant images into the minds of unsuspecting audiences, and the visionary *Videodrome* is as contemporary and relevant as ever. James Woods stars as Max Renn, a hustling entrepreneur in the pioneering days of cable TV who becomes fascinated by a pirate TV signal with brutal yet hypnotic S-and-M broadcasts. He's just looking for transgressive thrills to jolt his jaded sensibilities. What he gets is the Hallucination Channel, a subsonic virtual drug transmitted by television. It burrows into the mind and starts creating its own violent and disturbing images in Renn's head—and designer mutations in his flesh.

His investigations take him to the Cathode Ray Mission of "media prophet" Brian O'Blivion—a kind of reclusive, wacko version of Marshall MacLuhan who speaks only through TV monitors and takes the "guru" part of "media guru" seriously—and to corrective-lens entrepreneur Barry Convex (Cronenberg isn't shy about front-loading character names), a blankly creepy player in a bizarre conspiracy portrayed with a skin-deep, unctuous conviviality by Les Carlson.

On its surface you can read it as a media screed with a drug-addiction subtext. The alienating effects of TV and the skewed sense of reality caused by viewing the world through the cathode-ray window are central elements of his mind-bending thriller, but ultimately it's a reductive interpretation. Cronenberg uses the fears of television to manipulate an audience as a starting point for a conspiracy curled around his favorite topics: the response of the body human to technology, and disease and mutation as evolution. In the words of his own character, Cronenberg makes his visions become flesh, from a vaginal-like maw that opens in Woods's stomach to a gun that burrows into his hand with rootlike tendrils.

With *Videodrome*, however, Cronenberg takes his themes a step further than in his previous films. Renn's ordeal is as much about perception as mutation, and Cronenberg never leaves Renn's perspective. But

while we can never know whether Renn is experiencing a mutant leap into the future or a hallucinatory waking nightmare, there's no doubt that he's a slave to the signal.

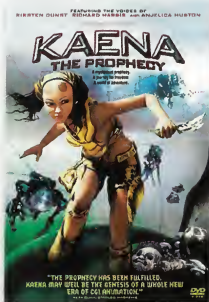
Rick Baker's latex and mechanical makeup effects, state of the art at the time, look as dated as the blurry, lo-fi video imagery of the pirate broadcasts. The creative madness of the ideas and the resonance of the visceral images make them nightmarish. Woods is at once charming and sleazy, and the jittery intensity and streetwise smarts behind his cable-TV carry attitude makes Max more vivid and passionate than any of Cronenberg's previous protagonists. Woods makes Renn an innocent at heart, a man fascinated by imagery but unnerved when the fantasies are made real, either in the consensual sex games of Deborah Harry's seductive radio psychologist or the battering blasts of brutal hallucinations. He makes Renn's journey as emotionally compelling as it is harrowing and alien.

The two-disc, unrated Criterion edition features the complete director's cut, with restored footage cut from its original theatrical showings. David Cronenberg is at his usual articulate and observant best on one of the two newly recorded commentary tracks on the disc (his comments are edited together with those of cinematographer Mark Irwin [Scanners, The Fly], but they were recorded separately; another track features actors James Woods and Deborah Harry). Other highlights include his lovely short film "Camera," a meditation on aging, imagery, and filmmaking made for the Toronto Film Festival in 2000; the original thirty-minute documentary "Forging the New Flesh," a detailed look into the making of the video and makeup effects directed and narrated by the film's video-effects supervisor Michael Lennick; and the 1983 "Fear on Film" roundtable discussion with Cronenberg, John Carpenter, and John Landis. Conducted by future filmmaker Mick Garris, it's a veritable time capsule of ambitious young directors, in a forum that allows them to discuss horror cinema, special-effects makeup, and censorship with intelligence and passion.

—Sean Axmaker

It's all a state of mind:

- *Brain Dead* (1990)
- *Lost Highway* (1997)
- *Fight Club* (1999)



Kaena: The Prophecy

Directed by Chris Delaparte and Pascal Pinan

Written by Chris Delaparte and Tarik Hamdine with Kenneth

Oppel; story by Patrick Daher

Starring Kirsten Dunst, Richard Harris, Anjelica Huston

Columbia Tri Star, 1 DVD, \$24.95



In this 3-D animated film from French production company Xilam, inquisitive young primitive Kaena (voiced by Kirsten Dunst) defies an authoritarian, hypocritical priest to search for a world beyond her homeland of dying thorn trees. Her quest inserts her into a conflict between the inhabitants of a crashed alien ship and the malevolent liquid creatures who, posing as gods, have enslaved her tribe.

Kaena: The Prophecy offers a refreshingly Gallic contrast to many American science-fiction flicks, including the *Star Wars* and *Matrix* series, which so often act as fables affirming the necessity of faith. Here the enemy is an ossified, parasitic religious system. Deliverance lies not in an ecumenically vague mysticism, but in skepticism and exploration. This sweet-natured atheist parable delivers a bracing charge of culture shock.

The film's design sense, which evokes the biological forms of art nouveau by way of Moebius, is also recognizably and exotically French.

If the storytelling were clearer and more potent, *Kaena* could claim an interest beyond its novelty value. The script, more focused on setting than character, mostly takes the protagonist on a tour of its own exposition. *Kaena* makes few pivotal choices.

The animators visually differentiate her arid, biological world from the chilly, technological realm of the alien ship by rendering both of them in monochrome. The thorn world is sepia; the ship, blue. Deprived of a wide color range, the 3-D sets and action are dark and hard to read. Nor are the animators, using off-the-rack software on a shoestring budget, able to solve the central problem of the CG format: while the eye immediately identifies with even the simplest, most stylized line drawing of a human figure, it rejects its 3-D counterpart as stiff and grotesque.

Kaena: The Prophecy is less a satisfying film than an artifact of a form whose potential remains unrealized.

—Robin D. Laws

Fantastic France:

- *Fantastic Planet* (1973)
- *The City of Lost Children* (1995)
- *The Fifth Element* (1997)

CRYPTO FILE

by James Lowder

"Made for television" is often assumed to be shorthand for "not good enough to be a feature film." That's not always the case, though. As this month's "Crypto File" entries demonstrate, clever ideas, great acting, and strong directing can overcome even the smallest of TV budgets.

Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water, Collections 1 and 2



Directed by Hideaki Anno, Kaichi Takada

Written by Tashia Okada, Hisea Okada, Kaoru Umena

Starring Yashino Takamari, Narika Hidaka, Akia Ohtsuka

ADV, 5 DVDs and 2 CDs (Vol. 1), 6 DVDs and 2 CDs (Vol. 2),

\$49.98 each



At the 1899 International Exposition in Paris, boy inventor Jean (Noriko Hidaka) rescues Nadia (Yashino Takamari), a circus acrobat, from a trio of crooks who are after the strange blue gemstone she wears. Together, the young pair set off on a series of adventures that will take them from the South Pole to Africa to the bridge of Captain Nemo's Nautilus.

Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water holds a special place in the hearts of anime fans, and with good reason. Many anime series feature engaging characters and thrilling action sequences, but *Nadia* also boasts the complex stories that lead director Hideaki Anno would later bring to his SF classic *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. While not as dark as *Evangelion*, *Nadia* still manages to tackle such weighty themes as the nature of death and the limits and responsibilities of technology, all without the smug preachiness so common in animation aimed at young adults.

The first *Nadia* collection includes the first twenty episodes of the original series, plus two soundtrack CDs. The second collection includes the remaining nineteen episodes, a pair of soundtrack CDs, and the *Nadia* feature film. Directed by Koichi Takada and released in 1993, the *Nadia* movie is a weak conclusion for such a wonderful series, though completists will be happy to find it included in these fine *Nadia* omnibus editions.

Crypto File

(continued from page 67)

The Night Stalker/ The Night Strangler



Directed by John Llewellyn Moxey and Dan Curtis
Written by Richard Matheson
Starring Darren McGavin,
Simon Oakland, Richard
Andersen
MGM, 2 DVDs, \$14.95



Shot in twelve days for a meager \$450,000, *The Night Stalker* debuted in January 1972 with enough sets tuned in to make it the highest-rated TV movie of its day. What that record audience saw was has-been big-city reporter Karl Kolchak (Darren McGavin) battle the system and the supernatural in his quest to uncover the truth about a vampire stalking Las Vegas. Part downtrodden cynic, part carefully shielded optimist, McGavin's Kolchak is a wonderful creation, one made all the more successful by a terrific supporting cast—in particular Simon Oakland (*The Sand Pebbles*) as the newsman's long-suffering editor. Kolchak's clashes with the establishment in *The Night Stalker* and the story's paranoid premise that monsters are real resonated so well with viewers that a sequel followed in 1973. Once again scripted by Richard Matheson, *The Night Strangler* features some great character bits hung upon a plot framework copied far too closely from the original.

(continued on page 69)

Village of the Damned/ Children of the Damned



Village of the Damned:
Directed by Wolf Rilla
Written by John Wyndham
(book), Stirling Silliphant, Wolf
Rilla, and George Barcloy
Starring George Sanders,
Borbor Shelley, Michael
Gwynn
MGM, 1960



Children of the Damned:
Directed by Antan Leader
Written by John Briley
Starring Ion Hedry, Alon Bodel,
Borbor Ferris
MGM, 1963



I DVD, \$19.99
Conventional wisdom says the 1970s were the golden decade of science-fiction cinema in America, but it's not too hard to make an equally forceful case for the 1950s. On the one hand you have visionary social criticism like *The Andromeda Strain*, *Soylent Green*, and *Silent Running*. On the other, you have frantic cautionary tales like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *The Thing from Another World*, and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Seventies science fiction successfully stoked our intellectual imagination, but fifties SF skillfully plumbed our emotions and instincts.

Wolf Rilla's *Village of the Damned* was perhaps the last great film that came out of the fifties tradition. Based on John Wyndham's 1957 novel *The Midwich Cuckoos*, *Village* begins with an entire English village collapsing into a deep, mysterious coma. The

townsfolk awake just a few hours later, but they soon discover that every fertile female in the village was somehow impregnated during the blackout. The women eventually give birth to identical albino children who mature at twenty times the normal rate, manifest a sort of eerie ESP, and start carrying out a plot to take over the world. The paranoid subtext—all the great fifties science-fiction films lean on their thinly disguised subtexts for resonance—is a warning about the next generation's potential to be corrupted by alien ideas that we cannot hope to understand.

Forty-odd years later, *Village* still stands up as a remarkably effective thriller. Rilla deftly and patiently constructs a suitably creepy atmosphere and, with the help of some great acting from George Sanders (*All about Eve*), manages to bring the whole thing to a tight, chilling climax.

This new DVD version of *Village of the Damned* is a double-feature disc that also sports the significantly inferior 1963 "sequel" (in name only), *Children of the Damned*. *Village* is the *Damned* to do; *Children* is the *Damned* to don't.

—Ray Winninger

More creepy kids:

- *The Omen* (1976)
- *Akaro* (1988)
- *Neor Dork* (1987)

Uzumaki



Directed by Higuchinsky
Written by Kenga Kaji, Tokao
Nitta, and Chika Yasua
Starring Eriko Hotsune, Fhi Fon,
Hinoko Soeki
Imoge, 1 DVD, \$19.99



The little town of Kurôzu-cho has a problem: spirals. They seem to show up everywhere. Not just in places you'd expect—snail shells and coiled springs and turning pottery wheels—but also in the smoke from the local crematorium and the twisted and curled corpses of the locals who are dying in increasingly grotesque ways. For the survivors, spirals are becoming an obsession, an embodiment of dread and perhaps a symbol of a potent curse that grips the town.

Adapted from Junji Ito's manga, *Uzumaki* is another stylish entry in the new wave of Japanese horror flicks making their way to the United States. Like the better known *Ringu* and *Ju-On: The Grudge*, *Uzumaki* offers up plenty of chills and several memorable images, thanks in large part to Gen Kobayashi's cinematography and Hiroshi Hayashida's striking production design. While the film succeeds in conjuring up an atmosphere of unease, however, it never manages to connect with the audience on a more visceral level. Eriko Hotsune is well cast as Kirie Goshima, the innocent young girl around whom the story unfolds. But like a spiral itself, the film opens at an overly casual pace.

It's only when a reporter joins Kirie and her boyfriend, Shuichi (Fhi Fon), in a search for the meaning of the spiral curse that director Higuchinsky finds the right tempo. Sadly, the narrative is largely abandoned as the film gathers speed for its finale, closing with little more than a blur of images—horrific, but lacking in context for anyone unfamiliar with the original manga.

Uzumaki is an interesting film, to be certain, but Junji Ito's creepy, Lovecraftian tale of a town twisted by ancient evil deserves a more fully realized treatment.

—James Lowder

Unsettling Japanese horror you might have missed:

- *Evil Dead Trap* (1988)
- *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989)
- *Audition* (2000)

Dawn of the Dead



Directed by Zack Snyder
Written by James Gunn, based on the 1978 screenplay by George A. Romero
Starring Sarah Polley, Ving Rhames, Jake Weber
Universal, 1 DVD, \$29.95



There's no surer sign that the age of irony is over than a rip-roaring remake of George Romero's 1978 satirical zombie epic *Down of the Dead* that ditches the absurdity and gets away with it. Weirder still: novice director Zack Snyder and screenwriter James Gunn (*Scooby-Doo*) use the zombie movie as a wrapper for a straight-faced take on an even more disreputable seventies genre, the disaster flick.

As per the original, a beleaguered group of apocalypse survivors hole up in a shopping mall, which is soon encircled by zombies. Here, though, the gut-munching cannibals are speedy, inexhaustible, and staggeringly numerous. There are moments of nasty humor, but the creatures themselves are never absurd or amusing.

Snyder delivers in full on his contractual obligations to the zombie audience, dishing out startles, suspense, and inventive gore effects. More importantly, he understands that real horror happens to characters we care about. Before plunging them into viscera-flecked jeopardy, he allows the cast, including indie goddess Sarah Polley (*eXistenZ*), reliably soulful tough guy Ving Rhames (*Pulp Fiction*), and low-key everyman Jake Weber (*Wendigo*) time to establish themselves as believable, ordinary people. The

many characters, though simply drawn, defy easy stereotypes. As they bond together to plan their way out of the mall, which remains largely impervious to invasion, the film outs itself as a tale of survival. As in *The Poseidon Adventure* or *The Towering Inferno*, some characters prove their mettle; others fall. Some die for explicable reasons; most fall prey to apocalyptic randomness.

The new *Dawn* is a bravura rehearsal for the end of the world. Especially effective is an early sequence in which Sarah Polley's nurse character emerges from her home to see her entire suburban neighborhood in flames. Ultimately, though, it's less pointed and audacious than the original, which still stands as the Citizen Kane of walking-dead movies.

—Robin D. Laws

Respectable remakes:

- *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978)
- *The Fly* (1986)
- *The Ring* (2002)

Van Helsing



Written and directed by Stephen Sommers
Starring Hugh Jackman, Kate Beckinsale, Richard Roxburgh
Universal, 2 DVDs, \$29.95



Director Stephen Sommers's 1999 release, *The Mummy*, provides an ideal template for a breezy, tongue-in-cheek action-horror flick fusing the joys of matinee past with contemporary expectations. *Van Helsing* tries for a repeat and gets the tone disastrously wrong.

The fatal polarity reversal is this: In *The Mummy*, the tongue-

in-cheek moments are carried by the charmingly daffy-yet-plucky heroes. The title villain remains properly menacing throughout. *Van Helsing*'s hero (Jackman, known to genre fans as Wolverine in the *X-Men* movies), who, as chief monster-slayer for the Vatican, confronts revised versions of Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, and the Wolfman, is envisioned as a laconic, duster-clad badass. To preserve his Clint Eastwoodness, the script shifts the comedy burden to head villain Dracula, rendering the action ludicrous from scene one.

The resulting tonal problems infect every element of the film, from its Wagner-versus-flamenco musical score to its aggressively ugly production design. The absurd plot merely connects the dots of an overloaded cast of characters. The poor actors shriek their way through lame schtick too jokeless for vaudeville. Supposedly serious scenes lumber embarrassingly. Corset-clad heroine Kate Beckinsale (*Underworld*) delivers her lines in a ridiculous Eva Gabor accent, one shared by Dracula's monstrous brides. CG creatures ripple with such patent unreality that *Van Helsing*'s video-game point score might as well appear on-screen as he snuffs them.

There is one cool moment in the whole flick, when jagged flaps of the Frankenstein monster's face come loose, exposing his glowing braincase. It lasts for a few seconds.

The risk in describing a misfire as desperately unengaging as *Van Helsing* is of accidentally encouraging masochistic curiosity seekers to check it out for themselves. Be warned: even if you assemble a crack team of hecklers to watch it with you, this bombastic self-parody will defeat your wit and crush your spirits.

—Robin D. Laws

Eagerly awaited misfires:

- *The Black Hole* (1979)
- *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984)
- *Planet of the Apes* (2001)

Theatrical release rating (reviewed by James Lawler in *Amazing* 603):



Crypto File

(continued from page 68)

The Singing Detective

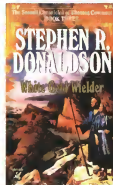
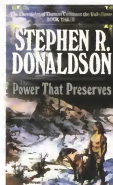
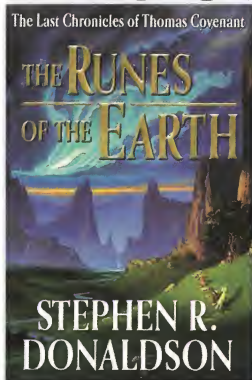


Directed by Jan Amiel
Written by Dennis Potter
Starring Michael Gambon, Patrick Malahide, Jaanme Whalley
BBC/Warner, 3 DVDs, \$59.98



Lauded by critics at its release in 1986 as the best dramatic work specifically written for television, *The Singing Detective* stands nearly twenty years later as an impressive achievement in visual storytelling. The British serial centers on mystery writer Philip Marlowe (Michael Gambon, *Dumbledore* in the *Harry Potter* movies), who has been hospitalized for a painful and debilitating skin condition. Over six episodes, several narrative threads intertwine—Marlowe's stay in the hospital; repressed events from his boyhood; fantasy sequences and paranoid imaginings; his mental revision of one of his novels, with himself in the role of detective. The structure demands the viewer also take on the role of detective, sorting fantasy from reality and assigning meaning to the various clues presented, though the serial itself does not suggest a pat solution to the mysteries and enigmas it introduces. The three-DVD set contains not only the original serial but also a documentary on writer Dennis Potter (*Pennies from Heaven*), a commentary track, and other worthwhile extras. Potter scripted the 2003 film version of *The Singing Detective* from his own teleplay, but the long, complex serial fared badly in translation to the big screen.

AS



THE RUNES OF THE EARTH: THE LAST CHRONICLES OF THOMAS COVENANT, BOOK ONE

By Stephen R. Donaldson
G. P. Putnam's Sons, hardcover, \$26.95



The first book in a multipart fantasy epic—that is, one of those trilogies, quartets, or sagas that tells one overarching story over the course of several books—is often insanely difficult to evaluate. With only a small part of the story in hand, it's difficult to tell whether the author is vamping to fill space or how much of the true plot readers have been allowed to glimpse. Yet while any conclusions are guesswork at best, the signs surrounding Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Runes of the Earth* are far from encouraging.

As *The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* begins, it's been ten years since Dr. Linden Avery—Covenant's companion and successor—has last visited the Land. Instead, she's caring for his mentally unbalanced ex-wife, Joan, and her own adopted son, the mute Jeremiah. But the appearance of Covenant's son Roger rapidly destabilizes the situation, and a cascade of catastrophes sends Linden careening back to the Land.

What follows is at once realistic and immensely frustrating. Even though 3,500 years have passed in the Land, leading to inevitable shifts in the balance of power, the factions and artifacts in play are entirely familiar. Yet while a degree of déjà vu is to be expected, Donaldson spends fully half the book introducing each faction, step by deliberate step, and only when all the players are onstage does the plot—such as it is—begin to advance in earnest.

At which point the grounds for argument multiply. Pacing is a particular puzzle; on one hand, once events do begin unfolding, they do so with

alacrity. To the extent that the story moves quickly through a "been there, done that" quest, setting the stage for the new saga to address new conflicts, it's admirable—but the quest is so easily accomplished that it suffers from Plot Coupon Syndrome ("pass go, collect artifact, proceed to dungeon-level two").

Also troubling are the various characters'—or rather the various factions'—motivations. While guilt and mortified self-doubt are familiar elements of the Covenant saga, *The Runes of the Earth* stretches these themes to the breaking point, to a degree that makes the story's cast look more like a collection of archetypes than a group of well-realized individual personalities.

Last but not least, the revelation that ends the book is nearly impossible to accept at face value. Either both Linden and the reader are being deceived—in which case the conclusion is the cheapest sort of false cliffhanger—or she's being handed the object of her primary personal quest on the proverbial silver platter. And if the latter is the case, then the entire book, not just the opening half, has been mere prologue to the real story Donaldson has in mind. Either way, it's an unsatisfying climax. Which is no surprise, really; the Covenant cycle has long been one of fantasy's most controversial epics, and this new entry in the saga gives no sign of changing that status.

—John C. Bunnell

More multivolume epics:

- *Crown of Stars*, by Kate Elliot
- *The Midkemia series*, by Raymond E. Feist
- *A Song of Ice and Fire*, by George R.R. Martin

Disappearing Act



By Margaret Ball
Baen, hardcover, \$22.00



As Margaret Ball's latest novel opens, everyone in sight is having a really bad day. Ruthless interstellar smuggler Johnivans has had his operation infiltrated by government investigator Calandra Vissi. Calandra's been captured, and her only escape route is out the nearest airlock into vacuum without benefit of space suit. And Maris, whose slipup set the day's events in motion, has been delegated by Johnivans to impersonate Calandra in order to distract the authorities—a job for which being dead is the best possible qualification.

Disappearing Act more than delivers the lively adventure yarn promised by this setup—but it does a good deal more besides. Readers looking for interesting SF ideas should be intrigued by the contraband at the heart of the smuggling traffic, a unique bio-organic "bacteriomat" capable of amazing feats of healing but available only in very limited quantities. Those seeking well-drawn cultural conflict will find it skillfully if lightly sketched on the planet Kalapriya, where Ball offers a setting clearly, but not slavishly, inspired by India in the British colonial era. And those looking for an agreeable romantic yarn will find that as well, if in rather suddenly and oddly timed form.

As agreeable as the narrative is, it's not without its thin spots. There are one or two more subplots in the mix than the novel really has room for, with the result that some aspects of the

climax are rather too convenient and others are rushed through more quickly than is really believable. Veteran readers will also spot one twist long before the characters do, although clearly with the author's blessing.

But the cleverly imagined technology and colorful setting nonetheless put *Disappearing Act* at the upper end of the space-opera lists, and Ball should have no trouble attracting readers to any of Maris's further adventures.

—John C. Bunnell

More space operas with savoir-faire:

- *The Price of the Stars*, by Debra Doyle and James D. Macdonald
- *McLendon's Syndrome*, by Robert Frezza
- *Trading in Danger*, by Elizabeth Moon

Banewrecker: Volume One of the Sundering



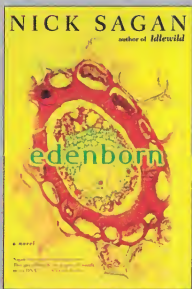
By Jacqueline Carey
Tor, hardcover, \$27.95



Kudos to Jacqueline Carey for trying something other than her Kushiel books, sexy as they may be. In *Banewrecker*, she grafts Tolkien's world to the Prometheus story of an antihero god who refuses to take back his gift to humankind. Unfortunately, her experiment doesn't click for most of the first volume.

Carey constantly invites comparisons to *The Lord of the Rings* with a Gandalflike wizard, gems of power, the elven city of Rivenslost, trolls, black riders, dragons, were-creatures, and even a fellowship quest with a naive bearer of the

Edenborn



By Nick Sagan
Putnam, hardcover, \$25.95



Sagan has had a previous career as a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Voyager* screenwriter, and it shows in *Edenborn*'s visual style, dialogue, and frenetic pace. This standalone followup to *Idlewild* is a postplague, near-future thriller that's heavy on page-turning plot and teen drama—in a good way.

The premise is a comfortable science-fiction chestnut: a plague has killed off the human population of Earth, and just six people have survived. Sagan's previous book, *Idlewild*, chronicled the story of the Black Ep plague, a virtual-reality murder mystery, and humanity's rebirth into a hostile world. *Edenborn* takes that background as a given and moves out of the virtual world. Sure, the survivors of *Idlewild* are the human inheritors of the planet—now what?

The rivals of the first book attempt to repopulate the Earth with children robust enough to survive the plague. The conflicts between the parents and children are much starker when the entire population of the globe is measured in double digits. The children are just coming of age and coming to terms with the conflicts between the two surviving families, one religious and VR-averse, the other secular and steeped in the virtual world. Some of *Edenborn*'s VR technology comes across as derivative and is largely taken for granted: we've seen it before in *Ender's Game* and *The Matrix*. This is more a drama of parents and children than one primarily about postapocalyptic Earth.

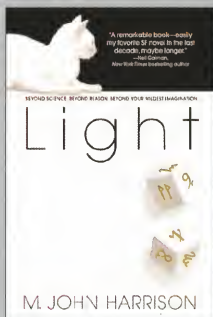
Sagan tells the story with a rapid-fire series of point-of-view shifts between the parents and the children, including one named Deuce whose point of view is deeply disturbed and whose real identity is obscured for the first half of the book. This approach keeps the pace zipping along and, if anything, is sometimes a little too quick. But in a time of gargantuan doorstep books, it's pleasant to drop into a book that drops you in, turns you on, and kicks you out.

—Wolfgang Bauer

Cheerfully apocalyptic SF:

- *Dies the Fire*, by S.M. Stirling
- *A Wall Around Eden*, by Joan Slonczewski
- *Earth Abides*, by George R. Stewart

Light



By **M. John Harrison**
Spectra, hardcover, \$16.00



Previously released in the UK, *Light* is a stylish and strange novel. The operatic narrative is formed by the interleaved stories of a serial killer, a human-spaceship hybrid, and an experience junkie.

Michael Kearney lives in 1999 and is part of a team working on a quantum computer. He kills at a steady pace to keep the Shrande—a horse-skulled fractal monster—at bay. Four centuries later, Seria Mau and Ed Chianese exist along the edges of the Kefahuchi Tract, a “singularity without an event horizon,” littered with artifacts from ancient races who tried to figure out its secrets.

Harrison flexes his authorial muscles to brilliant effect when he’s describing the everyday weirdness of life in a place where all theories of the universe are true. Ed Chianese learns to divine the future by sticking his head in a fish tank full of quantum eels. Seria Mau takes human passengers aboard but can’t stand the way they keep having sex and talking about themselves.

Still, three stories leave a lot of strings to tie up in the end. While Seria Mau and Ed Chianese’s bizarre lives turn out to have emotional antecedents, Kearney’s motives are oddly constructed. In attempting to reveal just enough and not too much, Harrison has left readers wondering about the obvious flaw in Kearney’s reasoning, which the Shrande points out to him in their final meeting.

But this is nipping, a small problem with an otherwise sparkling novel. Like Vernor Vinge’s *A Deepness in the Sky*, this novel is packed with characters you will never forget. Sometimes their names are anagrams, or they do the opposite of what they should, or they just dissolve into bits of brightness. Stylistically, *Light* is as good as it gets—more is going on in this story than we can ever know.

—Therese Littleton

Three more strange space tales:

- *A Deepness in the Sky*, by Vernor Vinge
- *Natural History*, by Justina Robson
- *The Golden Age*, by John C. Wright

one item that will destroy the god’s power. While retelling the Middle-earth saga from Mordor’s side might be interesting, doing it in Tolkien’s world would invite the wrath of copyright. Carey should have either gained permission to set the novel in Middle-earth or else created a world completely her own rather than this weak shadow.

Compounding *Banewrecker*’s problems is a high-fantasy writing style filled with honorifics, the recounting of great deeds, and lots of history on the ages of war. All this verbiage means is that the action doesn’t really begin until chapter six. Even then, prepare yourself for long passages of ponderous reminiscing or brooding.

As the book continues, the high-fantasy style relents a bit, allowing for some good confrontations both in battle and in relationships. Her black-rider character, Tanaros, retains a code of honor and loyalty rather than just being a creature of pure evil. The god himself, *Banewrecker*, makes the case for his defiance against the will of the other gods. But getting past the early hurdles to reach these scenes requires willpower.

—Shelly Baur

More antiheroes of high fantasy:

- *The Elric saga*, by Michael Moorcock
- *The Chronicles of Amber*, by Roger Zelazny
- *The Mists of Avalon*, by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Gifts



By **Ursula K. Le Guin**
Harcourt, hardcover, \$17.00



Le Guin turns her hand to teen fantasy in this book of two young people who must reconcile themselves to the magical gifts that they have inherited. The boy and girl heroes of *Gifts*, Orrec and Gry, seek their place in a world of feuding fiefdoms, arranged marriages, and sorcery. They’ve grown up together, always expecting they’ll stay childhood sweethearts and unite their families in marriage, but ... well, it wouldn’t be much of a story if everything worked out, would it? The book follows the traditional path of coming-of-age stories: rebellion and fights with parents, and ultimately finding one’s place in the world.

It’s not easy accepting adulthood. Orrec and Gry fear their own power, and that fear unbalances everything around them, disrupting established customs. Orrec isn’t even sure he can control his gift. The “gifts” of the title are frightening powers, with names like Unmaking, the Rein, and the Knife. They are just as nasty as they sound, and they burden their users with responsibilities over life, death, and dynastic alliances. Orrec and Gry have trouble taking on those burdens on their families’ terms. How others around them respond to their rebellion makes for excellent plotting, and Le Guin’s cool, spare writing is direct and satisfying. Just because you’ve got magical gifts doesn’t mean you don’t still hate your parents or find them embarrassing.

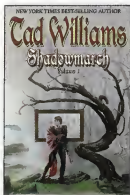
The poverty of the Upland tribes and their petty quarrels is reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands, and the clanish nature of some of the plot might seem odd. Modern readers don’t have much personal experience with cattle raiding or the political implications of arranged marriages—it’s a testament to Le Guin’s plotting that she makes them gripping. *Gifts* is tightly written and imagined, and as Le Guin’s first teen fantasy since *Tehanu* in 1990, it’s worth seeking out.

—Wolfgang Baur

More gifts for teen readers:

- *Shadowmancer*, by G.P. Taylor
- *His Dark Materials*, by Phillip Pullman
- *The House of the Scorpion*, by Nancy Farmer

Shadowmarch, Volume I



By Tad Williams
DAW, hardcover, \$25.95



For readers who discovered Tad Williams through his Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn fantasy cycle, the opening chapters of *Shadowmarch* will be an unreserved treat. Though set in an entirely new realm, for sheer richness and depth of detail, *Shadowmarch* is strongly reminiscent of the earlier saga's Hayholt. Beneath it lie the tunnels and stoneworks of the diminutive Funderlings, including one Chert; within its intrigue-filled halls walk Barrick and Briony, twin heirs to *Shadowmarch*'s throne; and defending it is the job of Ferras Vansen, grizzled captain of the Royal Guard.

But the scope of Williams's new epic reaches far beyond *Shadowmarch*. Two powerful threats face the castle and its surrounding kingdom. Behind the Shadowline in the north, the immortal faelike Qar plot both magical and mundane war, pressing the Shadowline itself south to cast a fog of madness over the mortal world. And across the sea to the south, on the continent of Xand, a fanatical god-priest known as the Autarch plots to expand his influence into northern lands—and to take as his newest bride the young acolyte Qinnitan, who is being groomed for a mysterious destiny by more than one unknown power.

Williams stage-manages an immense cast—including several major characters not mentioned here—with remarkable deftness. There are no unrelieved heroes or one-dimensional villains

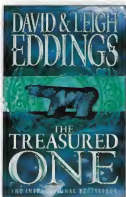
anywhere in sight; every one of the characters, even those not accorded primary-viewpoint status, emerges as a unique figure with his or her own virtues and vices. And although the book's ending is more pause for breath than climax, the first volume of *Shadowmarch* leaves readers with a broad, well-balanced portrait of a world on the brink of cataclysm. Tad Williams is already regarded as one of fantasy's most skilled practitioners, and this latest work more than confirms that status.

—John C. Bunnell

Other Tad Williams worlds:

- *Tailchaser's Song*
- *Caliban's Hour* (with Nina Kirikl Hoffman)
- *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn*

The Treasured One: Book Two of The Dreamers



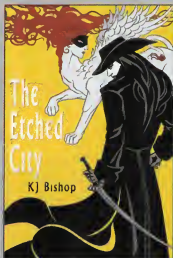
By David and Leigh Eddings
Warner, hardcover, \$25.95



Once again, the hive-based Vlagh need space to eat and breed. This time, they're invading the realm next door. With no suspense over who will win, *The Treasured One* focuses on gearing up for war as seen from the different viewpoints of a god, a corrupt priest, a farmer, a mercenary, and others. The Eddings move the plot along by the numbers, with *deus ex machina* interventions leavened with a dose of humor.

At times the imagery can be good, especially the descriptions of mountains and the sea. The pastoral setting is inhabited by farmers, herders, and hunters who require unbelievably long

The Etched City



By KJ Bishop
Spectra, trade paperback, \$14.00



KJ Bishop's first novel, *The Etched City*, isn't easily pigeonholed. In some respects it resembles a Western, with gunfighters roaming the streets and high-stakes card games haunting the saloons. At other times, it's gritty urban nightmare, where street-folk meet grim deaths and betrayal is common as dirt. Occasionally, it's a high-octane philosophical dialogue or a poignant romance. And at yet other moments, it takes on an *Arabian Nights* quality, matching otherworldly exoticism with genuinely weird magical goings-on.

But for all that *The Etched City* is at its heart a study in atmosphere and ideas; it's possessed of a relatively straightforward storyline. Throughout the book, events and episodes are connected through Gwynn, a mercenary and expert gunslinger who arrives in the city of Ashmoil and finds himself working for the crime lord known as Elm. Gwynn's sometime traveling companion, a self-trained doctor called Raule, pursues a mostly separate existence but doesn't get quite enough time onstage to count as a secondary protagonist.

Nonetheless, Bishop is a deft portrayor of character and a vivid purveyor of scene. The city of Ashmoil is in some respects a stronger presence in the book than either Gwynn or Raule, and the infrequent but powerful intrusion of occult events casts a pervasive shadow over the narrative. And what might seem at times like an indiscriminate use of names instead has the effect of lending a kind of universality to the setting so that instead of treating the milieu as an "alternate such-and-such," readers experience Ashmoil as an archetypal Elsewhere.

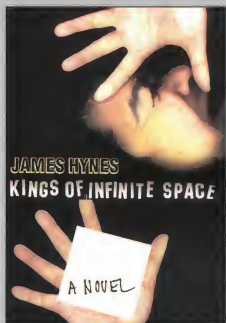
Though there's no shortage of tension or conflict, *The Etched City* isn't really an action yarn, and readers who mistake it for one may find it overwrought. But as a study in the twin constants of strangeness and principle, it's an unusually coherent narrative and a promising debut.

—John C. Bunnell

Further tales of the weird frontier:

- *The Stress of Her Regard*, by Tim Powers
- *Devil's Tower*, by Mark Sumner
- *The Death of the Necromancer*, by Martha Wells

Kings of Infinite Space



James Hynes
St. Martin's, 2004, \$24.95



What if it were all true? All the worst fears about those freaks in HR, all those doubts about the genetic heritage of management, all the cheap coffee-fueled speculation about after-hours activity in the ventilation ducts and storage rooms and secret spaces? Satirist James Hynes follows his nose into the depths of office low culture in *Kings of Infinite Space*, and readers can't help but follow revelation after insane revelation about the secret life of the masters of the Texas Department of General Services' General Services Division.

Hynes introduces Paul Trilby, PhD, at the butt end of his so-called career, working as a temp at the TxDOS after falling from grace as a professor of English Lit. Haunted by the ghost of his dead cat and every petty failure of a life rich with poor choices, he throws himself into his punishment regime like the most self-hating Kafka protagonist. Sharply drawn characters who seem to be snatched out of Neal Stephenson's subconscious heat up Hynes's *Inferno* and provoke convulsions of weeping hilarity. While the story devolves to boy-and-girl heroics, the details of Trilby's romancing of Callie the big scary mail girl and near-death at the hands of a cabal too creepy to reveal here practically turn the pages on their own.

The climactic battle between hapless good and relentless evil is every fanboy's dream of cube-farm-4—Jackie Chan might die happy knowing that he's influenced literature so thoroughly. *Kings of Infinite Space* feels like an extended anti-authoritarian episode of *The X-Files* unburdened by heroes striving for mystery so deeply that they barely seem to exist. Hynes explains just a little too much, but what he lays bare makes for damn good fun.

—Rob Lightner

Big secrets in little worlds:

- *The Big U*, by Neal Stephenson
- *Headcrash*, by Bruce Bethke
- *Time Out of Joint*, by Philip K. Dick

explanations on basic topics like spears, horses, and war. Lots of this filler dialogue could have been summarized instead.

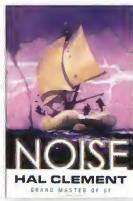
The *Dreamers* series doesn't pretend to be more than an unabashedly zippy read. It might entertain younger fantasy readers who like humor. Parents should note the well-sanitized death scenes and lack of racy content. Because of the constant reminders of the important plot points, the book can be read in multiple sittings without forgetting about what's happening, making it ideal when you need a no-brainer read.

—Shelly Baur

More fantasy humor:

- The Xanth series, by Piers Anthony
- The Discworld series, by Terry Pratchett
- The *Hitchhiker* trilogy, by Douglas Adams

Noise



By Hal Clement
Tor, 2003, \$13.95



Hal Clement, recently deceased and still mourned, was the grand old fella of the hard-science-fiction subgenre. Using characters as set elements and vice versa, hard-SF authors set themselves to imagining unusual situations for humans to interact with and rarely let story get in the way of their exposition. Clement rose to the top with his brilliant imagination and gift for explaining difficult concepts—his books, especially 1953's *Mission of Gravity*, have enraptured several generations of readers who love science but find textbooks too dry.

His last novel, *Noise*, follows

linguistic anthropologist Mike Hoani's exploration of Kainui, a planet completely covered in water and swathed in a toxic atmosphere. Unpredictable, cacophonous storms of titanic proportions buffet the ships and floating cities built by the colonists Hoani studies, creating near-impossible living conditions that the inhabitants take in stride. The skimpy plot involves a reverse-engineering mystery in which people are black boxes. Readers who dig muscular feats of engineering, meteorology, and nautical science will get off on Clement's work, while those who ask both how and why will come up a bit short.

Of course, "why" is beside the point. The idea that engineers can and will master seemingly intractable environmental problems seems quaint these days at best, but it does speak to the increasingly rare meeting of the nerdy and the worldly. We need more of that, and Clement spent his long life promoting its value. In *Noise*, he offers us his last thoughtful look at man vs. nature.

—Rob Lightner

Last novels by great authors:

- *For Love and Glory*, by Poul Anderson
- *To Sell beyond the Sunset*, by Robert A. Heinlein
- *Humpty Dumpty: An Oval*, by Damon Knight

Gaudeamus



By John Barnes
Tor, hardcover, \$24.95



"I always feel vaguely cheated," wrote Chester Anderson back in 1967, "by first-person novels wherein the name of the narrator

is not the name of the author. This is irrational, but there it is." So begins Anderson's *The Butterfly Kid*, a pitch-perfect, hippie-era yarn explaining how Anderson and writer-roommate Michael Kurland saved Greenwich Village (not to mention Earth) from an invasion of alien space lobsters.

Fast-forward almost four decades, replace Anderson with hard-SF novelist John Barnes, and you have *Gaudeamus*, an equally pitch-perfect Internet-age yarn in which Barnes, fellow real-world writer Kara Dalkey, and private investigator Travis Bismarck save the rural Midwest (not to mention Earth) from an invasion of weirder and more diverse aliens.

While the two novels share both premise and narrative gimmick, Barnes does much more than merely recycle the idea. The true protagonist of *Gaudeamus* is Bismarck, who's been hired by a defense contractor to trace an industrial-espionage leak, and Bismarck's adventures—which get increasingly weirder—drive the story. And where Anderson builds his story almost entirely around "Reality Pills," the Gaudeamus technology that underlies Barnes's tale is considerably more versatile (though one of its manifestations bears a remarkable resemblance to Anderson's funky pharmaceuticals). Before the book is over, we've seen teleportation, flying saucers, sexual telepathy, next-generation Web comics, and an incredibly awful rock band, all connected to a plot that may turn Earth into an alien nature preserve.

Barnes carries off the narrative with just the right amount of cheerfully disturbing plausibility. *Gaudeamus* is not only a worthy updating of and homage to *The Butterfly Kid*, it's a lively SF yarn on its own merits, equal parts cautionary tale, urban legend, and screwball comedy. If only it were true ...

—John C. Bunnell

More SF writers vs. aliens:

- *The Butterfly Kid*, by Chester Anderson
- *Footfall*, by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle
- *Callohan's Crosstime Solano*, by Spider Robinson

MEDALON: Book One of the Hythrun Chronicles

TREASON KEEP: Book Two of the Hythrun Chronicles



By Jennifer Fallon
Tor, hardcover, \$24.95 (*Medalon*) and \$25.95 (*Treason Keep*)



Finally, Fallon's first series sees print in the States. In the *Hythrun Chronicles*, the country of Medalon resembles ancient Rome, with corrupt leaders, arena fights, coup d'états, and politics galore—including sexual and religious. No one is entirely pure; even the legionlike Defenders are tainted and must constantly choose whether to honor their service oath or their morals.

Fallon's world thrives on contrasts: theocrats ally themselves with an atheist Sisterhood, capricious gods dodge the demon seeking to bring them down, and warlords who honor the Jainlike Harshini will not kill even to save themselves.

The heroines R'shiel and Princess Adrina possess a delightful omeriness, and they squirm in and out of predicaments caused by their own rash tongues. Sometimes the men come out fighting, like Damin Wolfblade who's quick with both comebacks and a sword. More often, they turn into backdrops for the women.

Unfortunately, the villains start out strong and smart, but then they grow predictable. Fallon seems to like the James Bond-style movie moment, in which villains gloat rather than kill their victim; or they just beat up the women. Neither is as satisfying as well-rounded bad guys, but the book's original characters, good attention to details, and fun plot twists help overcome these problems.

—Shelly Baur

Other novels featuring coups d'état:

- *The Lynesse series*, by Jack Vance
- *The Second Sons trilogy*, by Jennifer Fallon
- *The Farseer trilogy*, by Robin Hobb

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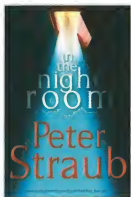
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In the Night Room



By Peter Straub
Random House, hardcover,
\$21.95



Peter Straub has always been a writer who never fails to maintain a certain level of craftsmanship; but lately, with books like *lost boy* and *lost girl*, Straub has been a man on fire. He continues that hot streak with *In the Night Room*, a ghostly story that calls the work of H.P. Lovecraft and Robert Aickman to mind and pivots on the actions of Straub's favorite alter ego, Tim Underhill, and one Willy Patrick, the award-winning author of a children's book entitled *In the Night Room*.

Still suffering pangs of loss after the death of her husband and young daughter, Willy (who is trying to rebound via a second marriage) has been having daydreams that her daughter is still alive, waiting to be rescued. What's more, large chunks of time go missing from her memory. To top it all off, her fiancé acts mysterious and seems to have ties to ominous and threatening people.

Underhill has simultaneously been receiving emails from dead acquaintances, friends, and a demigodlike being calling itself Cyra; he's also been seeing the ghost of his long-dead sister. Just as he's trying to process all of that, an intense fan named Jasper Kohle shows up spouting crazed theories about Underhill's books and their effect on the thread of reality.

Straub takes these seemingly separate narratives and folds them together to explore themes of reality versus fantasy and the

desire for perfection in both life and art. In *The Night Room* is yet another brilliant piece of work by a writer who should long ago have been honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award; and if it doesn't garner recognition from the National Book Award committee, there's no literary justice in this universe.

—Dorman T. Shindler

Score up these books if In the Night Room gave you chills:

- *A Winter Haunting*, by Dan Simmons
- *At the Mountains of Madness*, by H.P. Lovecraft
- *Pointed Devils: Strange Stories*, by Robert Aickman

Prince of Christler-Coke



By Neil Barrett Jr.
Golden Gryphon, hardcover,
\$25.95



A master of satire and droll humor, Neil Barrett Jr. (whose *The Hereafter Gang* is a genuine classic) sets his latest in a post-apocalypse, corporate-downsized America. In this oddball future, the separation between the haves and the have-nots is like the Grand Canyon, with one group enjoying a high-tech and wealthy life, while others are dirt-poor and resort to savage, survivalist methods to eke out a daily existence.

Ruled by royal families who are so dead set against manual labor that they refuse to feed or dress themselves, the conglomerate business empires of the future are located on the East and West coasts. The narrative follows the adventures of Asel Iacola, Prince of Christler-Coke and heir to America East,

who loses his kingdom after a "takeover" alliance forms between Ducky Du Pontiac-Heinz, Lord of the SEC, and Jackie Cee, who works for the Disney-Dow rulers of Calfoggy State. Sent away to the National Executive Rehabilitation Facility (NERF), Asel (who at first comes off as arrogant and empty-headed), proves to be an open-minded lad of honor. With the help of Sylvan Lee McCree (once the High Earl of Dixie-Datadog), Asel escapes NERF only to have a run-in with the Techs-Mechs Rangers and find himself enslaved by the gorgeous "Nones" of Our Lady of Reluctant Desire (O.L.O.R.D.), and then rescued by a band of rebels. Barrett's latest is a spot-on, slapstick satire of our corporate-driven, government-ridden, acronym-laden times.

—Dorman T. Shindler

Try these books if you liked Prince of Christler-Coke:

- *Gulliver's Travels*, by Jonathan Swift
- *Planet of the Apes*, by Pierre Boulle
- *The Princess Bride*, by William Goldman

The Plot Against America



By Philip Roth
Houghton Mifflin, hardcover,
\$26.95



Those scratching their heads at the review of a Philip Roth novel in a science-fiction and fantasy magazine should check out *The Breast*, a fantasy in which Roth's character turns into (you guessed it) a giant breast. His latest is

much more serious and timely. Set in an alternate reality in which Charles A. Lindbergh defeats FDR in the 1940 presidential election, Roth's story shows how one event can change the course of history. Incorporating some of Lindbergh's actual radio addresses—filled with anti-British and anti-Semitic content—Roth shows how isolationism and the enacting of new laws create a national atmosphere of paranoia and religious-driven hatred.

For the fictional Roth and his Jewish family, it spells doom as nationwide pogroms begin. Even Roth's own family is caught up in the polarized national politics, as half of them, understanding the eventual outcome of President Lindbergh's policies, want to rebel, while the other half want to go along and not make waves, eventually aiding in their own destruction. Roth grounds his eerie tale in reality with historical figures like Fiorello La Guardia, Walter Winchell, and Henry Ford.

Never maudlin or preachy—and even humorous at times—Roth's latest is a powerful, perfectly timed political fable about what can happen when a nation allows itself to be swept along by fear and ignorance, and how each misstep can result in greater losses of liberty.

—Dorman T. Shindler

Step into these alternate worlds if you enjoyed The Plot Against America:

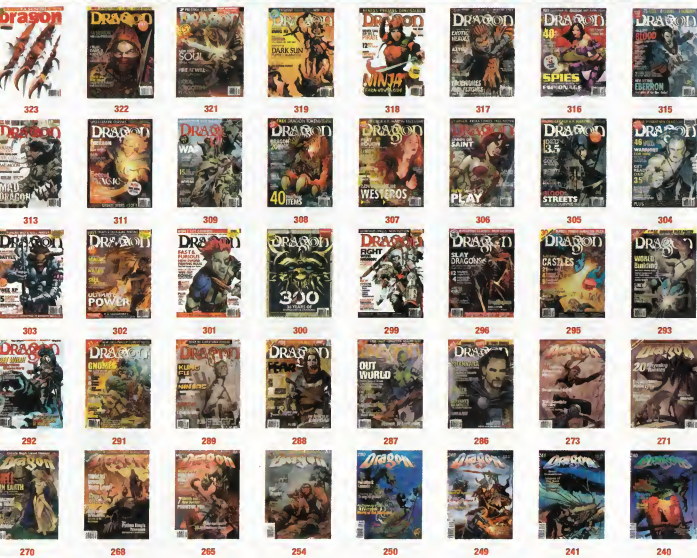
- *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood
- *The Man in the High Castle*, by Philip K. Dick
- *Fatherland*, by Robert Harris

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TRANSMETROPOLITAN: TALES OF HUMAN WASTE

Written by Warren Ellis

Illustrated by Darick Robertson, et al.
Vertigo, graphic novel, \$9.95



Misanthropy means never wanting to say you're sorry. Mad-genius comics writer Warren Ellis let his hyperintelligent id run amok through the pages of *Transmetropolitan* for five too-short years. His alter ego, anarchojournalist Spider Jerusalem, armed only with his infallible wit and his infamous bowel disruptor, stalks the streets of the City and spits the ugliest truths back in the face of his public. What's not to love?

This collection steps outside the *Transmetropolitan* storyline with a sort of montage that Spider junkies and newbies will devour with equal abandon. Dozens of artists—including Glenn Fabry, John Cassaday, John McCrea, Judd Winick, and Brian Michael Bendis—illustrate snippets and sections of Jerusalem's wild "I Hate It Here" columns from journalistic monolith the Word. Though these scenes from the City showcase Ellis's warnings of future tech as the utopias of the masses, the rantings of Jerusalem's column are grounded in old-school disgust at man's inhumanity to man. It's a thoroughly heartwarming combination for the early twenty-first-century misanthrope (and if you're not misanthropic yet, you're not paying attention).

The art is as manic and dark and gently human as the writing, with a wide range of styles that collectively sneer at cyberpunk as hopelessly quaint. Even those rendered temporarily illiterate by Ellis's prose blasts can enjoy this gallery of who's who in today's edgy comics art. The volume opens with a short narrative—the already-reprinted "Edgy Winter," a very special holiday story that those in the know will already have seen. It's a great transition from reality into the nonlinear explosion of beautiful madness that follows.

—Rob Lightner

More Ellis madness:

- Global Frequency (first collection 2004)
- Planetary (ongoing)
- Orbiter (2004)



BATTLE ROYALE

Written by Koushun Takami and Masayuki Taguchi
Illustrated by Masayuki Taguchi
TokyoPop, bimonthly graphic novel, \$9.99



The infamous *Battle Royale* series serves up heaping portions of everything some readers find objectionable about manga: storylines laced with extreme violence and graphic, even fetishistic sex centered on characters too young for a driver's license. In this case, forty-two ninth-graders find themselves trapped on an isolated island, unwilling participants in the Program, a government-sponsored military research exercise in which they must fight for survival against their fellow students. Escape is impossible, thanks to the explosive tracking collars with which the kids have been fitted. The variety of weapons provided the combatants guarantees maximum carnage as the middle-school class winnows itself down to a lone survivor.

Like the 2000 cinematic treatment of Koushun Takami's cult novel, the *Battle Royale* manga foregrounds certain plot points at the expense of others. But the overall adaptation is much more faithful to the novel than the film, and it shares the novel's strengths: interesting characters; stunning action sequences; a compelling treatment of the dehumanizing effect of fear; and a compulsive, guilty readability. Writer-artist Masayuki Taguchi also does a good job expanding the backgrounds of some of the students—in particular tough girl "Hardcore" Mitsuko Souma, whose grim history contributes many of the manga's most controversial scenes.

Battle Royale purists should note that TokyoPop's translation downplays the original story's alternate-history setting and political commentary in favor of depicting the Program as a sort of extreme reality-TV show. While this approach certainly lends the series cultural relevance for American audiences subjected to *Survivor* and its numberless spawn, the manga's own content makes criticism of the media exploitation of the Program appear rather hypocritical.

—James Lowder

Other disturbingly violent manga:

- *Berserk*, written and illustrated by Kentaro Miura
- *Tamie*, written and illustrated by Junji Ito
- *Devilman*, written and illustrated by Go Nagai



EVIL EYE

Written and illustrated
by Richard Sala
Fantagraphics, triannual,
\$3.95



Brutes skulking through shadow-draped alleys, grotesque schemers aligned in myriad secret societies, and pretty young heroines quite capable of fending for themselves populate the grim yet darkly cheerful world of Richard Sala's comics. After years of producing weird serials and shorts for such anthologies as *Blab* and *Zero Zero*, Sala has his own title, *Evil Eye*.

Three times a year, *Evil Eye* presents individual tales and new installments of continuing stories. The first dozen issues have seen the completion of the serial "Reflection in a Glass Scorpion," a gruesome mystery yarn featuring Sala's girl detective, Judy Drod. A casual reader might mistake Drod for an alumna of the same sleuth school that produced Nancy Drew, but her explosive-filled outbursts and genuine disrespect for authority suggest her training occurred somewhere off-limits to the inquisitive-yet-upright sweetheart of River Heights. Peppered among the "Scorpion" chapters have been stand-alone tales starring the ingenious Peculia, whose adventures have included a harrowing visit to a witches' grocery store and an overnight trip to an inn stalked by Death.

Sala's striking artwork and focus on the macabre have drawn frequent comparisons to the illustrations of Charles Addams and Edward Gorey, but Sala's influences go well beyond that talented pair. His women are zafki, and his renderings of them informed by "good girl" art conventions and the unabashed sexuality of Continental pulp culture. The bursts of vivid and often surreal violence that lend the tales a palpable sense of danger tie them to Italian horror and *giallo* films, just as the bizarre plot contrivances suggest the influence of early-twentieth-century European pulp thrillers, such as the wonderful *Fantômas* series. Under Sala's masterful direction, these disparate inspirations come together in a web of stories that will both entertain and unsettle readers adventurous enough to seek out them out.

—James Lowder

Essential films for the Richard Sala fan:

- *Les Vampires* (1915)
- *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919)
- *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933)

SEPTEMBER 1939

World War II was perhaps the most significant historical and cultural event of the twentieth century, causing profound social and technological changes that had effects on aeronautics, the space program, the women's-liberation movement, the formation of the modern nation of Israel, and nuclear power (and the threat of global thermonuclear annihilation). Six million European Jews perished in the implementation of Hitler's Final Solution, and other ethnic populations were similarly threatened. Countless more soldiers and civilians perished during the war. And in ramping up material and munitions production for the war effort, the United States finally became an economic and military superpower.

Less significantly, the war had a similarly profound effect on the field of science fiction, introducing or popularizing many concepts that would become science-fiction staples: eugenics and racial superhumans, scientific doomsdays, and postapocalyptic survival. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki introduced fear of runaway atomic mutation to popular culture—an entire generation of 1950s giant-monster movies and the X-Men are two comparatively frivolous results of this preoccupation. And no categorical villain has ever been as widespread in post-war genre fiction as the Nazi, whether cast as wartime world conquerors, mad scientists hiding in South American jungle shacks, or thinly disguised tyrants in a galaxy far, far away.

In the Pages of AMAZING STORIES

The September 1939 issue is Volume 13, Number 9. The cover, by Robert Fuqua, illustrates "Beast of the Island," by Alexander M. Phillips. The story tells of two aviators, stranded on a desert island, being terrorized by a mechanical monster. The story goes to considerable lengths to disguise the nature of the monster until an appropriate point for the "reveal" is reached, but the cover painting gives the whole thing away. (At this time, the American public is still interested in the mystery surrounding the disappearance of aviators Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan in the South Pacific in July 1937, so the choice of this piece as the issue's cover story is perhaps an obvious one.)

In Bertrand L. Shurtleff's "The Underground City," miners are disappearing . . . and the denizens of Subterranea are to blame. In "When the Moon Died," by Don Wilcox, the Earth is being evacuated because the moon is wandering dangerously close; pilots are in short supply, and our heroes deal with the wickedness of an unscrupulous evacuation profiteer. "The Face in the Sky," by Thornton Ayre, begins "The Year 1990!" Nebula 76K grows into a face, obliterates Polaris, and begins talking to the people of Earth. Robert Moore Williams's "Rocket Race to Luna" has pilot instructor Timothy Wayne coping with a female trainee ("Teach a woman to fly! Of all things!") and spanking her when she enters the titular race without his blessing. (The story's ending, to put it mildly, is not a victory for women's liberation.) In "The Fate Changer," by Richard O. Lewis, a stockbroker hopes to use the prophetic invention of Dr. Factsworth to exploit the stock market, but there is, as expected, a surprise ending.

In the letters column, a nineteen-year-old sprat by the name of Ray D. Bradbury informs *Amazing*, "You are improving a little bit, aren't you? Slowly but surely you're coming back up the ladder from kiddies' tales to something vaguely interesting. . . . Gosh, but it's awful to have to say that *Amazing* is improving. For a year now it has been my favorite science-fiction gripe! Give me a good shock with each issue from now on, and pretty soon you'll reach the top!"

In this issue's advertisements, we learn that we can get rid of dandruff by shampooing with Listerine, that car tires cost between \$3.50 and \$5.00 for tire and tube, that "Tobacco Redeemer" can help us stop smoking, and that—a hopeful sign, this—"There's money in fiction writing!"



Scientific Snippets Scattered through the Issue

“The problem scientists most want to solve may be solved by the new two-hundred-inch reflector at Mt. Wilson. Is the universe expanding or does light get tired and lose energy in its race through space? Dr. Edwin Hubble is the man who will most likely answer the question.”

“Now that scientists have succeeded in releasing some of the vast stores of energy locked in the atom, there is considerable speculation concerning the use of atomic energy as a source of commercial power.”

“Astronomers are interested in nova because what can happen to one star can happen to another. Our own sun is a star. It might easily become a nova and destroy its children, the planets.”

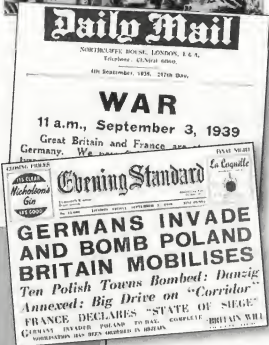
IN THE HEADLINES

- September 1: A German military force numbering 1.2 million sweeps into Poland. This event is the breaking point for many European nations, who declare war on Germany; for this reason, historians will point to the invasion of Poland as the start of World War II.
- September 17: The Soviet Union, at this point a German ally, invades Poland from the east.
- September 30: Polish casualties number sixty thousand dead and two hundred thousand wounded. Nearly three quarters of a million Polish troops have been captured.



ELSEWHERE IN THE NEWS

- The New York stock market is on the rise as speculators predict a war-economy boom.
- Aviation hero Charles A. Lindbergh, at this point an admirer of the Third Reich, tries to persuade Americans to keep out of the war.
- Twenty-one-year-old tennis player Bobby Riggs (who won three titles at Wimbledon two months before, and who will, in the 1970s, lose a famous tennis match against Billie Jean King) wins the men's division at Forest Hills.
- Joe Louis defeats Bob Pastor by knockout for the heavyweight boxing title.
- The concept of black holes is introduced to many in the pages of *Physical Review*.



ON THE SCREEN

- September 1: Debuting this month is *The Women*, directed by George Cukor. Adapted from the play by Clare Booth, it is enlivened by cruel, witty dialogue and claws-and-fangs performances of Joan Crawford, Joan Fontaine, Paulette Goddard, Rosalind Russell, and Norma Shearer. On the same day, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is screened at the Cannes Film Festival. This adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel stars Charles Laughton as Quasimodo and introduces the world to Maureen O'Hara as gypsy dancer Esmeralda.
- September 11: Basil Rathbone makes his star turn as Sherlock Holmes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. A high-class release from Universal, the Victorian mystery costars Nigel Bruce as a bumbling Dr. Watson. Rathbone and Bruce will make one more Holmes adaptation for Universal, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* in 1940. Subsequent Rathbone-Bruce Holmes movies will be released by another studio, with the characters placed in a World War II setting.
- September 15: Though it premiered in August, *Beau Geste* goes into wide release on this date. The second film adaptation of Percival Christopher Wren's novel, it stars Gary Cooper in the title role in a story of Foreign Legion action and family intrigue.
- September 27: *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* premieres. Directed by Michael Curtiz (who will go on to direct Yankee Doodle Dandy and Casablanca) and starring film icons Bette Davis, Errol Flynn, Vincent Price, Olivia de Havilland, and Alan Hale Sr., the movie tells the story of the love affair between Queen Elizabeth I (Davis) and the Earl of Essex (Flynn).
- B-movies, potboilers, and genre movies released this month include *Arrest Bulldog Drummond*, *Charlie Chan at Treasure Island*, *Dick Tracy's G-Men*, *Espionage Agent*, *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase*, *Rio*, *Sky Patrol* (adapted from the *Talkin' Tommy* comic strip), and *The Witness Vanishes*. Notable films that begin shooting this month include *Charlie Chaplin's The Great Dictator*, a satire of Adolf Hitler that, despite its piercing qualities, will still be considered far too gentle considering other events taking place this month.



Notable Figures Born This Month

- September 1: comedienne Lily Tomlin
- September 5: model-actor George Lazenby
- September 13: actor Richard Kiel
- September 17: US Supreme Court justice David H. Souter
- September 18: comedian Fred Willard
- September 29: actor Larry Linville

Q&A HARRY TURTLEDOVE

Rewriting History

by Darrell Schweitzer



Photo supplied by Harry Turtledove.

Harry Turtledove is a master of the alternate-history story, famous for such books as *The Guns of the South: A Novel of the Civil War*; *The Great War: American Front*; and the *Worldwar* series.

Why do alternate histories fascinate readers?

Alternate histories give us a way to look at the world that we can't get any other way. They let extremes meet that didn't in real history. They let us look at the world in a fun-house mirror.

When constructing an alternate history, you start with a departure point. Then what do you do?

It depends on whether you're focusing on the characters immediately after the break point, whether you want to let it run for a while to see how things look twenty years, forty years, a hundred years down the line. There is no hard-and-fast answer to that. It depends on the purpose of the story and what you're doing with it.

How do you popularize alternate histories in a society whose citizens don't know much history anyway?

That's one of the reasons the most popular alternate histories in the United States are those based on the American Civil War and those based on World War II. The first was the great choke point through which American history flows, and the second is wrongly imagined as the great historical choke point through which the twentieth century flows. That's why those two are the most popular.

When you have other settings, you have to do more work in laying out your background. You really don't want to lay it out in great lumps. That makes for a certain challenge.

My guess is that there's not a lot of movie potential in this sort of thing.

I've had *Guns of the South* optioned. I've never had anything filmed.

If you were to do a story about going back in history to change one thing, either to make a better world or a better story, what would it be?

One of the things I'm working on right now is trying to make Atlantis plausible in alternate-history terms.

Do you mean a supercivilization on a continent in the Atlantic, or Thera, or what?

I'm talking about a continent in the Atlantic—or at least a subcontinent: imagine North America [splitting] about halfway between the Appalachians and the Mississippi [and the eastern portion] drifting off eighty million years ago.

Hopefully people will realize that didn't happen.

One never knows.

How do you find the individual, human story in the mass of speculation about alternate endings to wars—or drifting continents?

I hope I will. I haven't written this one yet. You try to focus on the people involved in the story, and you tell it through their eyes and what they know and what they are experiencing and what they feel. That's the story. The rest is background. If you lose the forest for the trees or if you sell your birthright for—Sturgeon's phrase—"a pot of message," your story won't work.

In *The Guns of the South* you introduce AK-47s into the nineteenth century and reverse the historical process, which gives us some idea of how it works.

Actually, no. What I was trying to do in that story was to say, "All right, the South in 1861 proposed to do this, that, and the other thing." So I thought, "All right, if you get to do this, that, and the other thing—if you have all your wishes granted—what happens after they all come true?" That's what I was interested in.

Why are so many alternate-history stories about war?

Because it's easy to dramatize. An awful lot of stories of any sort are about war because stories are about characters under stress, and the things that can put a character under stress most readily are love and war. That's what stories are about. **AS**



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